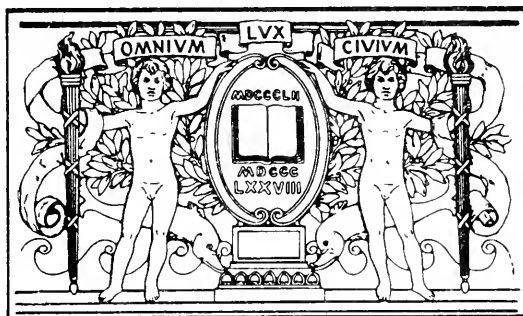


THE WAR-TRAIL FORT



JAMES WILLARD SCHULTZ

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WE SAW HIM STOOP OVER THE FALLEN MAN, THEN RISE WITH
A BOW AND A SHIELD THAT HE WAVED ALOFT (page 50)

The War-Trail Fort

*Further Adventures of
Thomas Fox and Pitamakan*

BY
JAMES WILLARD SCHULTZ

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
GEORGE VARIAN



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CHAPTER I

A COMPANY DISSOLVES AND A NEW VENTURE STARTS

ONE of the most vivid impressions of my youth is of a certain evening in the spring of 1865. It was the evening of May 21. Just before sundown the first steamboat of the season, the *Yellowstone II*, arrived from St. Louis and brought the astounding news that the American Fur Company was going out of business and was selling its various trading-posts, forts and stocks of goods, good-will and all, to private individuals.

To most of us in Fort Benton, factor, clerks, artisans, voyageurs, trappers and hunters, it was as if the world were coming to an end. The company — by which we meant the Chouteaus, father and sons — was the beginning and the end of our

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existence. We revered the very name of it; we were faithful to it and ready to die for it if need be. Now we were left to shift for ourselves. What were we to do?

Boylike, I had gone aboard the boat as soon as it landed and had passed an hour in wandering about it from end to end and from hold to pilot-house. Up in the pilot-house I found Joe La Barge, the most famous and trusted of the Missouri River pilots.

“Well, Master Thomas Fox,” he said to me, “it is bad news that we have brought you, is n’t it? What is your Uncle Wesley going to do, I wonder, now that the company is selling out?”

“The company is selling out? What do you mean?” I faltered.

He told me, and I turned from him instantly and ran ashore. I sprang through the stockade gate of the fort and paused, struck by something unfamiliar there in the great court: it was the strange silence. The voyageurs, the trappers and hunters, most voluble of men, were sitting in the doorways

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of their quarters and saying never a word; the terrible news had tongue-tied them. I had been hurrying to my uncle's quarters to ask the truth of what the pilot had told me; but the dejected attitude of the employees was proof enough that the news was true.

A tall, lean voyageur rushed by me to the center of the court and raised his outstretched hands to the sky. "My frien's," he cried, "dis ees mos' unjust! Dis ees one terrible calamitee! I call le bon Dieu to weetness dat eet is but two summer ago, een St. Louis, dat Pierre Chouteau, he say to me, 'Louis, you are ze bon cordelier! You are serve us mos' faithful dese many year! W'en de time come dat you can no longer pull eet de cordelle, de company, he shall give you a pension; een your hold hage you shall be mos' comfortable!'

"An' now, my frien's, ze great company, he ees dead! Ze pension pour le pauvre Louis, eet is not!" he went on in an increasingly frenzied shriek. "My frien's, I am ask you, w'at am I to do? I am fear ze Pieds Noirs; ze Gros Ventres; ze Assiniboins!

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I no can trap ze beav'! I no can hunt ze buf'! Eet ees zat I mus' die!"

He turned and with wild gestures fled from the court. His listeners slumped even more dejectedly into their lowly seats. I went on to my uncle's quarters and found two of the clerks, George Steell and Matthew Carroll, sitting with my uncle, and his wife, Tsistsaki, — true mother to me, — at his shoulder. I sat down upon my cot in a corner of the room and listened to their conversation and gathered that the Chouteaus had written to the three men, offering to sell them the fort and its contents upon most reasonable terms, and that my uncle had declined to enter into partnership with the two in purchasing the place and carrying on the business. At that, like poor Louis, the voyageur, I, too, was dismayed. "What, then, are we to do?" I asked myself.

The two visitors expressed great regret at my uncle's decision, said that they feared he would soon find that he had made a mistake, and went out. As soon as the door closed behind them, my

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uncle sprang from his seat, whirled Tsistsaki round three or four times, made a pass at me, and cried, "Well, my woman, well, Thomas, this is my great day! I am no longer under obligations to the company — there is no more company. I am free! Free to be what I have long wanted to be, an independent, lone Indian trader!"

Tsistsaki thoroughly understood English but never spoke it for fear that she would make a mistake and be laughed at. In her own language she cried, "Oh, my man! Do you mean that? Are we to leave this place and with my people follow the buffalo?"

"Something like that," he told her.

"O good! Good!" I all but shouted. "That means that I shall have no end of good times riding about and hunting with Pitamakan!"

He, you know, was my true-and-tried chum. Young though we were, we had experienced some wild adventures. We two had passed a winter in the depths of the Rockies; we had been to the shore of the Western Sea and back; and we had seen the

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great deserts and the strange peoples of the always-summer land. It was in my mind, now, that this sudden turn in the affairs of my uncle was to be the cause of more adventures for us. I could fairly scent them.

As to Tsistsaki, she went almost crazy with joy. "The gods are good to us!" she cried. "They have answered my prayers! Oh, how I have begged them, my man, to turn your steps to the wide plains and the mountains of our great hunting-ground! It is not good for us, you know, to live shut within these walls winter after winter and summer after summer, seeing no farther than the slopes and the cutbanks of this river bottom. To be well and happy we must do some roaming now and then and live as Old Man, our Maker, intended us to live, in airy buffalo-leather lodges, and close upon the breast of our mother [the earth]. Tell me, now, where we are going and when, so that I may have all our things packed."

"I cannot tell you that until I have talked with the chiefs. I am going now to counsel with them,

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for the steamboat starts back for St. Louis very early in the morning, and upon the decision of the chiefs depends the size of the trade-goods orders that I shall send down with the captain."

"We shall go over to camp with you!" Tsistsaki declared.

My uncle told me to order the stableman, Bissette, to saddle three horses for us. Within fifteen minutes we were heading for the valley of the Teton, five miles to the north, where more than ten thousand Indians were waiting to trade their winter take of robes and furs for the goods that the steamboats were to bring to us. All the North Blackfeet and the Bloods and the Gros Ventres were there, and our own people, the Pikuni, the southern, or Montana, branch, of the great Blackfoot Confederacy. We called the Pikuni "our people," because nearly all of our company men in Fort Benton were married to women of that tribe.

What a thunder of sound struck our ears as we arrived at the edge of the valley slope and looked

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down into it! It was all aglow with fires shining yellow through the buffalo-leather lodge skins. Drums were booming; people were singing, laughing, and dancing; children were shouting; horses were impatiently whinnying for their mates; and dogs were howling defiance to their wild kin of the plains, the deep-voiced wolves and shrill-yelping coyotes. We paused but a moment, listening to it all, and hurried on down to the camp of the Pikuni and the lodge of White Wolf, chief of the Small Robes Clan, brother of Tsistsaki and father of my chum, Pitamakan — Running Eagle.

Tethering our horses to some brush, we went inside and were made welcome, my uncle taking the honor seat at the right of the chief. In as few words as possible my uncle explained why we had come and the need for hurry, and White Wolf at once sent messengers up and down the valley to ask the different tribal head chiefs to come to his lodge for a council with Pi-oh' Sis-tsi-kum — Far Thunder — as my uncle had been most honorably renamed at the medicine-lodge ceremonials of the

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previous summer. Within an hour they had all arrived, Big Lake of the Pikuni, Crow Foot of the North Blackfeet, Calf Shirt of the Bloods, and Lone Bull of the Gros Ventres, and with them came some of their under-chiefs — clan chiefs and chiefs of the various branches of the All Friends Society. The lodge became so crowded with them that the women and children were obliged to retire to other lodges.

“Well, Far Thunder,” Big Lake said to my uncle, when all were seated and the pipe was going the round of the circle, “we were all busy directing our women in the packing of our robes and furs for to-morrow’s trade, for we had been told of the arrival of the fire boat; but when you called we came. Speak; our ears await your words!”

My uncle had a wonderful command of the Blackfoot language. Briefly in well-chosen words he told them that the great company was winding up its affairs. He explained that Steell and Carroll would take over the company fort and the business, and then said that he himself had decided to enter

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into close trade relations with them, especially to keep them supplied with goods and ammunition during their winter hunts; he asked them to decide at once where they would pass the coming winter, for upon their decision depended the size of the order for goods that must be sent on the fire boat, which was to return down-river in the morning. Loud clapping of hands and cries of approval answered this last statement, and then Crow Foot, the greatest chief, perhaps, of the confederacy, said, "Far Thunder, brother! Your offer to winter-trade with us is the best news we have ever had. No more will our young men be obliged to make long and dangerous journeys through winter snows and killing blizzards to the fort across from here for fresh supplies of powder and balls, and other things. No longer will our hunters be obliged to sit idle in their lodges. Brother, I think we may safely leave the choice of our coming winter-hunting country to you!"

"Ai! Ai! Far Thunder, brother, the words of Crow Foot are our words!" cried some of the

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chiefs. And others said, "Yes, Far Thunder, be yours the choice!"

"I thank you for your generosity," my uncle replied. "Brothers, I choose a part of our country that is black with buffalo; whose wooded valleys shelter countless elk and deer. In its very center will I build my trade-house. Brothers, before the Moon of Falling Leaves is ended you shall see it standing, full of goods, at the mouth of On-the-Other-Side Bear River!"

"Ha! At the mouth of the Musselshell, where the steamboats will unload the trade goods almost at our doors!" I said to myself.

"No! No! I protest! Not there, brothers!" cried Lone Bull, the Gros Ventre chief. "That is too dangerous a country! Last winter, during all its moons, the Assiniboina were encamped in its northern part, the valley of Little River [Milk River on the maps. So named by Lewis and Clark], and the Crows were at the same time camping in the valley of On-the-Other-Side Bear River, where they will doubtless hunt again this coming winter!"

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“Ha! All the more reason that we should winter there!” cried Big Lake. “We have too long neglected that part of our country. It is our plain duty to go down there and clean it of our enemies and keep it clean of them. If we fail to do so, they will be soon claiming it their very own, the gift of their gods to them.”

“Right you are, brother,” cried Crow Foot, “and wise is Far Thunder! He could not have made a better choosing. What say you all? Is it decided that we winter down there?”

“Yes! Yes!” they all answered — all but Lone Bull and his under-chiefs.

“You still object to the choice?” said Big Lake to him.

“I do, though I shall be there with you. My silence now is my warning to you all that you are making a mistake for which we shall pay dearly with our blood!” he answered.

“Ha! Since when were we afraid of our enemies!” Calf Shirt exclaimed.

So was that matter settled. White Wolf knocked

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the ashes from the smoke pipe, and the chiefs filed out of the lodge to go their homeward ways. As the women returned, I said to my chum, "Pitamakan, almost-brother, we are certainly going to see some exciting, perhaps dangerous times down in that On-the-Other-Side Bear River country!"

"Excitement, danger, they make life," he answered.

Tsistsaki, coming in, heard my remark. She turned to my uncle. "So, man mine, we go to the On-the-Other-Side Bear River country, do we? Yes? Oh, I am glad! Down there grow plenty of plums. I shall gather quantities of them for our winter use!"

We went out, mounted our horses, and hurried home and to bed. That is, Tsistsaki and I did; my uncle worked all night, writing out his trade-goods orders. The steamboat men worked all night, too, unloading freight for the fort, and when I awoke in the morning the boat had left with its load of company furs.

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When we were eating breakfast, my uncle said to us, "Well, woman, well, youngster, we start upon a new trail now, a trail of my own making, and I feel that it is going to be a trail easy and worth blazing. All that I have in the world, about twenty thousand dollars, I am putting into the venture, and on top of that I am asking for more than ten thousand dollars' worth of goods on a year's time. Thomas, we have just got to pay that bill when it comes due, fourteen months from now, or Wesley Fox's name will become a byword in St. Louis."

"We shall pay it, sir," I said.

"Absolutely, we shall pay it, if I have to beg robes and beaver skins from my people to make up the amount!" Tsistsaki declared.

Looking back at it after all these years, I see that the dissolution of the American Fur Company was an historical event. Its founders and its later owners, the Chouteaus, had been the first to profit by the discoveries of the Lewis and Clark expedition, and year by year they had built a string of

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trading-posts along the Missouri, which did an enormous business in trading with the various tribes of Indians for their buffalo robes and beaver and other furs. But little by little the richness and vastness of the Missouri River country became known to the outside world; first came various opposition fur-traders, then settlers upon the rich bottom lands of the river.

Before the settlers the Indians and the buffaloes fled, and the income of the company correspondingly decreased. The Chouteaus simply could not brook opposition, or trade with penny-saving settlers, profitable as that might have been; so in this year of 1865 they went out of business. At the time only two of the company posts, Fort Union, at the mouth of the Yellowstone, and Fort Benton were in what may be termed still virgin country; that is, country still rich in buffaloes and fur animals and controlled by various powerful tribes of Indians. It was fear of the Indians that kept the settlers back.

We were to embark for the mouth of the Mussel-

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shell upon the next steamboat that arrived, and my uncle was very busy getting together our necessary equipment and engaging the help that we should need. I helped him as much as I could, but found time to ride over to the camp on the Teton and ask Pitamakan to go down-river with us. His father objected to his going, on the ground that he was needed in camp to herd the large band of horses that belonged to the family, and in which I had then about forty head, my very own horses. But finally a youth was found to take his place, and Pitamakan was free to come with us. On the last day of May the second steamboat of the season tied up at the river-bank in front of the fort, and in the afternoon of the following day we went aboard it with our outfit and were off upon our new adventure. The outfit comprised ten engagés, all of them with their wives, women of the Pikuni, several of whom had children; six work-horses and two heavy wagons; three ordinary saddle-horses, property of the engagés, and three fast buffalo-runners, one of which was Is-spai-u, the Spaniard, the most noted,

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the most valuable buffalo-horse in all the Northwest; eleven Indian lodges, one to each family; tools of all kinds; some provisions; a six-pounder cannon with a few balls and plenty of grapeshot; and of course our own personal weapons.

The women were tremendously excited over their first ride in a steamboat; they marveled at the swiftness with which it sped down the river and cried out in terror every time the boilers let off their surplus steam with a loud roaring. Soon after passing the mouth of the Shonkin, a few miles below the fort, we sighted buffaloes, and from there on to our destination we were never out of sight of them grazing in the bottom lands, filing down the precipitous sides of the valley to water and climbing out to graze upon the wide plains.

Other kinds of game were also constantly in sight, elk, white-tailed deer and mule deer, antelopes, bighorns upon the cliffs, wolves and coyotes, and now and then a grizzly.

All too quickly we sped down the river, which is swift and narrow here, and at night tied up at

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the mouth of Cow Creek, where twelve years later a small party of us from Fort Benton were to fight the Nez Percés, just before General Miles rounded them up. This was the Middle Creek — Stahk-tsi-ki-e-tuk-tai — of the Blackfeet, so named because it rises in the depression between the Bear Paw and the Little Rocky Mountains.

Shortly before noon the next day the boat landed us and our outfit at the mouth of the Musselshell River. There was a fine grove of cottonwoods bordering the stream, but we had no thought of taking advantage of its cool, shady shelter. Instead we put up our lodges in the open bottom on the west side of the Musselshell, about three hundred yards from it and something like fifty yards back from the shore of the Missouri. My uncle declared that we had too many of them and made one lodge suffice for three families. We therefore put up four lodges, as closely together as possible, and cut and hauled logs for a barrier round them. We completed the barrier that evening and felt that we were fairly well protected from the attacks of war

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parties. As Pitamakan truly said, we were camped right upon one of the greatest war trails in the country. Crows, Cheyennes, and Arapahoes going north, and Assiniboins, Crees, and Yanktonnais going south, here came to cross the Missouri upon the wide and shallow ford just below the mouth of the Musselshell. Had my uncle been unable to buy the six-pounder cannon from Carroll and Steell, I doubt whether he would have ventured to build a post at this place. We felt that "thunder mouth" would be of as much service to us in a fight with a war party as fifty experienced plainsmen would be, could they be obtained. The Indians were terribly afraid of cannon, not so much because of the execution they did, I have often thought, as because of the tremendous roar of their discharge. To the mind of the red man it was too much like the fearful reverberations of their dread thunder bird, wanton slayer of men and animals, shatterer of trees and of the very rocks of the mountains.

Taking no chances with our horses, we picketed them that evening with long ropes close to our bar-

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ricade, and at bedtime Pitamakan and I went out and slept in their midst; but nothing happened to disturb our rest. At daylight we arose and turned the work-horses loose to graze near by until we needed them. The day broke clear and warm. Up in the pineclad bad-land breaks that formed the east side of the Musselshell Valley we could see numerous bands of buffaloes, and there were more in the valley itself and in the bottom of the Missouri directly across from us. Hundreds of antelopes were with the buffaloes, and elk and deer were moving about in the edge of the timber bordering the smaller stream. We went over to the Musselshell and bathed, and then heard Tsistsaki calling us to come and eat.

“Now, then, you youngsters,” my uncle said to us when we were seated, “the engagés have their instructions, and here are yours. You are not to lift a hand toward the building of this fort, for I have three other uses for you. You are to take good care of the horses, keep the camp well supplied with meat, and be ever on the lookout for war parties.”

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“Easy enough!” Pitamakan exclaimed. “With so little to do, I see us growing fat, and with fat comes laziness. I see this camp going hungry before many moons have passed.”

“You need n’t joke,” said my uncle, very seriously. “This is no joking matter. Upon the alertness and watchfulness of you two depend our lives and the success of this undertaking!”

“I take shame to myself,” Pitamakan said. “As you say, this is important work that you charge us with. If trouble comes, it shall be through no fault of ours!”

CHAPTER II

A HOSTILE TRIBE LEAVES FOOTPRINTS

BY the time Pitamakan and I had finished breakfast the engagés had hitched up the teams and gone to cut logs, and my uncle was marking out the site for the fort on level ground just behind our barricade. He had drawn the plan for it while we were coming down the river. It was to be in the form of a square. The south, west, and north sides were each to be formed by the walls of a building eighty feet long, twenty feet wide, nine feet high. The roof was to be of poles heavily covered with well-packed earth. At the southwest and northeast corners there were to be bastions with portholes for the cannon and for rifles. The east side of the square was to be a high stockade of logs with a strong gate in it.

Leaving my uncle at his work, Pitamakan and I watered the saddle-horses and then, saddling two, rode out after meat. We could, of course, have gone into the timber just above the log-cutters and

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killed some deer or elk, but we wanted first to explore the valley. Here and there were narrow groves of timber with growths of willows between them; and again long stretches where the grass grew to the very edge of the banks.

We carefully examined the dusty game trails and every sandbar and mud slope of the river for signs of man, but not a single moccasin track did we see. That was no proof, however, that war parties had not recently passed up or down the valley. Instead of following the course of the river, they were far more likely to keep well up in the breaks on the east side of the valley, from which they could constantly see far up and down it.

I was not very keen for hunting that morning, because I was worrying about my uncle's charge to us. "Almost-brother," I said presently as I brought my horse to a stand, "the load that Far Thunder has put upon us is too heavy for our backs. Look, now, at this great country; this brush and timber-bordered stream; those deep, pineclad bad-land breaks; the great plain to the west, seamed with

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coulees; the heavily timbered valley of the Big River. We cannot possibly watch it all. We have not the eyes of the gods to see right through the trees and brush and discover what they conceal. Watch as we may, a war party can easily come right down to the mouth of this stream and attack the log-cutters or charge our barricade, and we never know of their approach until we hear their shots and yells!"

"What you say is plain truth!" Pitamakan exclaimed. "But well you know that Far Thunder is a wise chief. He does not expect us to do the impossible; his heavy talk was just to make us as watchful and careful as we possibly can be. But come, we waste time. We have to provide meat for the middle-of-the-day eating!"

"All right, we go," I answered, "but I am uneasy. When we return to camp I shall say a few words to Far Thunder."

Not far ahead a band of a hundred and more buffaloes were filing down a sharp, bare ridge of the bad lands to water. Under cover of the brush

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we rode to the point they would strike and awaited their coming. They were thirsty; the big cow in front was stepping faster and faster as she neared the foot of the slope; then, scenting the water, she broke into a lope. The whole band came thundering after her, raising a cloud of fine, light dust.

We let our eager horses go when the buffaloes were about fifty yards from us. Pitamakan shot down the old lead cow, and I a fat two-year-old bull; then what a scattering there was!

Drawing my six-shooter, I turned my horse after another two-year-old bull and gained upon it, but just as I was about to fire it sprang sharply round and dodged back past me. My horse turned, too, with a suddenness that all but unseated me. He had the bit in his teeth. I could not have checked him if I would, and he was determined that the bull should not escape. Nor did it. I overtook and downed it after a chase of several hundred yards, but was then, of course, out of the run. Away up the flat Pitamakan was still in the thick of the fleeing band. I saw him shoot twice, and then he,

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too, came to a stand. In all we had shot six fine animals, meat enough to last our camp for some time. We carefully butchered them all, cutting the carcasses into portions that could be easily loaded into the wagon that would come for them, and then, packing upon our horses several sets of the boss ribs for dinner, we started back.

The day was now very hot; so we rode in the shade of the timber bordering the stream and in a short time entered the big grove at the mouth of it. We could plainly hear the incessant thudding of axes and the crash of the big cottonwood as it struck the ground. I told Pitamakan that the men were working like beavers, and then he laughed. It was a simile quite new to him.

There was here dense underbrush, much of which was higher than our heads and penetrable only by the well-worn zigzag trails of game. We were following what seemed to be the most direct of the trails and were now so near the choppers that we could plainly hear several of them talking, but still, owing to the dense, high brush, we were unable to

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see any of them. Then suddenly, right in front of us, a shot rang out; and in answer to it, Pitamakan brought his rifle to his shoulder and fired at something that I could dimly see tearing away from us through a thick growth of rosebushes. "Enemies! My horse is hit! Look out!"

Simultaneously we heard a piercing shriek of pain and fear, the well-known voice of Louis, the cordelier, he who had bewailed the death of the company and the loss of his promised pension. "Help! Help! I am shot! I die! Help, messieurs! Ze enemy, he comes, tousans of heem!"

I grasped the situation at once and, fearing that others of the choppers would mistake us for enemies, dashed on past Pitamakan, shouting, "Don't shoot! It is we! Don't shoot!" I cleared the high brush just as the roused men were gathering in a circle about Louis, who was still wildly shrieking for help.

"Now, what is all this about?" cried my uncle as he came running up to the group.

"I am shot! Me, I die!" Louis cried.

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“He thought us enemies. He fired at Pitamakan and got shot himself,” I explained.

“Let us see the wound,” my uncle demanded.

“No use! I die!”

“Throw him down, men, throw him down! We’ll see how badly he is hurt!” my uncle ordered; and down he went.

“Huh! Just as I thought! Nothing but a bullet scratch! Get up, you crazy scamp! Get up! Go to the river and wash yourself, and then come back to work!” said my uncle disgustedly.

“Where is his rifle?” some one asked.

“Dropped right where he fired it,” I hazarded; and there it was found.

“Wal, now, me, I call Louis’s hittin’ that hoss a plumb miracle!” exclaimed an American engagé, Illinois Joe, so called because he was always talking about the glories of that State. “To my certain knowledge that there is the fust time Louis ever come nigh hittin’ what he aimed to kill!”

The men resumed their work, and my uncle went to the camp with us. We unloaded the boss ribs

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and picketed our horses, Pitamakan rubbing some marrow grease into the wound of his animal. I then told my uncle that I thought that we could not possibly guard the men from sudden surprise by the enemy.

“You will do the best you can, and that is all I ask from you,” he answered. “From now on, one of the engagés shall stand guard while the others work, and I will take a turn at it myself. You have meat up there? Take a team and wagon and bring it in.”

We had the meat in camp by two o'clock; then my uncle advised us to ride out upon discovery. As Pitamakan's runner would be of no service for some time to come, I borrowed Is-spai-u and let him have my fast horse. We could, of course, have ridden the scrub horses of the engagés, but did not care to trust our lives to their slow running in case we should be surprised by a war party.

Is-spai-u was a horse with a history. Four summers before, in the spring of 1861, a war party of seven of the Pikuni, led by One Horn, a noted war-

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rior and medicine man, had gone south on a raid with the avowed intention never to turn back until they had penetrated far into the always-summer land and taken fine horses from the Spanish settlers of that country. That meant a journey southward on foot of all of fifteen hundred miles and an absence from us of at least a year. They chose to go on foot because they could thus most surely pass through that long stretch of hostile country without being discovered by the enemy.

Fifty — yes, a hundred — warriors begged One Horn to be allowed to join his party, but he had had a dream in which the Seven Persons, as the constellation of the Great Bear was called, had appeared and advised him what to do, and he would take only six men. Each one of the six was a man of proved valor and intelligence.

The summer passed and the winter. One Horn and his party were to return in the Moon of Full-Grown Leaves, but they came not. With the appearance of the Berries-Ripe Moon they were long overdue, and some said that without doubt their

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bones were whitening on the sands of the grassless plains far to the south. Still, hoping against hope, the old medicine man prayed on for them at setting of the sun, and all the people prayed with him.

It was in the Moon of Falling Leaves — October — that we in Fort Benton noticed a lone horseman fording the river and wondered who he could be. Then we saw that it was One Horn. He approached the gate, mournfully calling over and over the names of his six companions; and we knew that they were dead, and the women set up a great wailing for them. When he rode slowly into the court we thought that we had never seen so thin and careworn a man; he was just bones covered with wrinkled skin, and across his breast was a tightly drawn bandage of what had evidently been his buffalo-leather leggings.

We were so painfully struck with his forlorn appearance that we did not at first notice the horse he rode; but when he slipped from it and staggered into the outstretched arms of the crying women, Antoine, the stableman, stepped up to it to lead it

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away, and he cried out, "See, my frien's, dis horse so beautiful!" We almost cried out with him. The animal was shining black and in good flesh, clean-limbed, of powerful build, gentle and proud.

"A thoroughbred, if ever there was one!" said my uncle, who was standing beside me. "Unquestionably of Andalusian stock!"

Tsistsaki had One Horn carried into our quarters and a robe couch made up for him. A woman brought in some soup hot from her hearth, but he would take only a few sups of it. My uncle cut away the bandage round his breast and disclosed a jagged wound several inches long, partly healed, but badly discolored and suppurating at the lower end.

"It was all healed over, then it got bad again," One Horn whispered.

My uncle shook his head. "Mortification has set in; I fear there is no hope for him," he said in English to Tsistsaki and me.

Then he carefully washed the wound, medicated it, and put a clean, soft bandage upon it.

When the wounded man awoke that evening, my

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uncle asked him to tell us his adventures on the long south trail.

We thought that he was never going to answer, so long did he stare straight up at the roof; but finally he said, so low that it was with straining ears that we heard him: "Far Thunder, Tsistsaki! My words shall be few. We went far into the country of the Spanish white men and came upon a camp of plains people and in their herds of good horses saw the horse that I rode here to-day. We raided that camp and took many horses, among them the black, Is-spai-u, as I have named him. We got safe away from that camp. But then — oh, my friends! through my fault my companions died. I was in great hurry to get back here. I would not heed the warnings of my dreams. I took chances. Through a rough country I led my men in the daytime when I should have traveled at night. We were seen by the enemy, but saw them not. They made ready for our coming and suddenly rode out at us. My companions fought bravely, killed many and were themselves killed.

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I was wounded, but because I was upon this black horse I escaped. So swift was he that none of the enemy could overtake me. At first my wound was very bad; then it got better, and I took courage. I said to myself that I would return to this south country with all the warriors of the Pikuni and avenge the death of my companions. Then my wound got steadily worse. Far Thunder, my wound is killing me. No, don't deny it; you know it as well as I do. From the time you and I first met we have been friends. You have been good to me. Now we part. This night I am going upon the long trail to the Sand Hills. I give you the black horse. You must promise me always to keep him. You promise? That is good! North and south, east and west, he is the swiftest, the most tireless horse on all the plains. I know that you will be good to him. I can talk no more."

Nor did he ever speak again. He soon became unconscious and died before midnight.

Now, my Uncle Wesley was a great sportsman and loved more than anything else the excitement

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of a buffalo run with a good horse under him, a bow in his hand, and a quiver full of arrows at his back. "You can have your rifle and your six-shooters for the chase," he would often say, "but the bow for me. While you are fooling away time reloading your weapons, I shall be slipping arrows into good, fat cows!"

Several months after the death of One Horn, a herd of buffaloes drifted into the upper end of the bottom and gave him a chance to try Is-spai-u. Word spread that my uncle was going to run the buffaloes, and when he rode out from the fort all the men followed him who had horses or could borrow them. I shall not go into the details of that run, but will simply say that when it ended twenty-seven buffaloes lay strung along the plain with my uncle's arrows in them! It was the best run ever made in the whole Northwest, so far as was known, and the success of it was owing more to the swiftness and endurance of Is-spai-u than to the skill of my uncle with the bow. The reputation of the black horse was established. Through visit-

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ing Kootenay Indians it spread to all the west-side tribes, the Kalispels, Nez Percés, and Snakes. When bands from the Blackfoot tribes came into the fort at different times in order to trade, the first request of the chiefs and warriors was for a sight of the wonderful animal.

In time our engagés took word of him to our different forts along the river, and thus all the other tribes, Sioux, Assiniboin, Crows, Crees, and Yanktonnais, came to know about him. Deputations from all the tribes that were at peace with the Blackfeet came to the fort and made fabulous offers for the animal. At the risk of their lives, some Snakes brought in one hundred and ten good ordinary horses that they wanted to trade for the black runner. A chief of the Yanktonnais, then trading mostly with the Hudson's Bay Company at their Assiniboin River post, sent word that he would give two hundred horses for him. My uncle's one answer to all of the would-be purchasers was that the black was not for sale. We soon heard that many a warrior of the tribes hostile

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to the Blackfeet had vowed to get the horse in one way or another. Within a year three desperate attempts were made to steal him right out from the fort, and the last raiders, three Assiniboins, paid for the attempt with their lives.

On the evening before we left Fort Benton George Steell had begged my uncle to leave Is-spai-u in his care. "You know how flies swarm about a molasses keg. Well, so will the hostiles swarm about you down there when they learn that the runner is with you. Be sensible for once, Wesley, and let me have him until your fort is completed."

"George, I know you mean well," my uncle replied, "but, consarn it, you're too reckless! You would cripple him in no time. Is-spai-u goes with me!"

Half angry at that, Steell shrugged his shoulders and turned away from us without another word. My uncle had been right in refusing him the use of the animal; he was the most reckless, hard-riding buffalo hunter in all the country.

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After this explanation, you can imagine my pride and happiness in mounting Is-spai-u for the first time. He was eager to go; I let him have the bit.

“Well, almost-brother,” I said to Pitamakan, “we are off upon discovery. Which way shall we go?”

“First, straight to the head of the breaks yonder, from which we can see far up and down Big River and the plains to the north of it,” he answered.

We passed through the grove in which the men were working, crossed the Musselshell and began the steep climb, following a game trail that was sure to keep us out of trouble in the maze of bad-land breaks ahead. Two thirds of the way up the breaks we entered the lowermost of the scrub-pine and juniper growths that concealed the heads of most of the coulees, from which great numbers of mule deer and occasionally some fine-looking elk fled at our approach. Within an hour we arrived at the summit, and there in a dense grove found a war lodge that had been put up not more than three nights before. By its size, and the signs within, we judged that it had been the one night’s resting-place

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of a party of between fifteen and twenty men, and the pattern of the beadwork of a pair of worn-out moccasins that we found partly charred in the fireplace proved to us that they were Assiniboin. Circling the place, we found their trail in the spongy, volcanic ash of which the bad lands are mainly composed. They were going south, and I said to Pitamakan that they would doubtless come back the same way from their raid against the Crows, or whatever tribe they were heading for, and would, of course, discover our camp.

“Well, what else can you expect? I should not be astonished if some enemies already have their eyes upon it,” he answered.

After watching for some time the valley of the Missouri and the great plains to the north of it we turned south along the heads of the breaks and traveled at a good pace for an hour or more along a rolling plain. We then turned westward into the valley of the Musselshell and saw across it the narrow and sparsely timbered valley of a small stream putting in from the Moccasin Mountains, the east-

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ern end of which, Black Butte, seemed very near to us. I had read the journal of the Lewis and Clark expedition many times, and so recognized that small and generally dry watercourse by their description of it.

The sun was near setting when we struck the small grove of timber at the junction of the two streams, and there in a dusty game trail we found the moccasined footprints of men — a war party, of course — traveling north. We could not determine how recently they had passed, but upon following the trail to the shore of the river we saw where they had sat down to remove their moccasins and leggings, and we found the tracks of their bare feet in the mud at the edge of the stream. In several of the footprints the water was still muddy; in others the mud had settled.

“They have crossed here since we left the head of the breaks!” Pitamakan exclaimed.

“Yes!” I said. “We must get to camp with the news as fast as our horses can carry us!”



WE FOUND THE TRACKS OF THEIR BARE FEET IN THE MUD

CHAPTER III

FAR THUNDER RIDS THE PLAINS OF A RASCAL

WE crossed the river and rode up Sacajawea Creek to the valley. Then we climbed to the rim of the plain and rode along it to camp. I had constantly to hold in Is-spai-u so that Pitamakan, riding my fast buffalo-runner, could keep up with me. It was dusk when we arrived in camp. The women — some of them, not Tsistsaki, you may be sure — cried out in alarm at the news that we had found the fresh trail of a war party traveling down the valley, and Louis wailed, “Pauvre me! Pauvre me! I am lose my pension; and now I shall be keeled by zese war parties! Oh, wat a countree terrible ees zis!”

“Oh, be still, Windy!” Sol Abbott growled at him. “You make us all tired! Be a man!”

Solomon Abbott, a lank, red-haired Missourian six feet two inches in height, a famous plainsman and trapper and a brave and kindly fellow, was our

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best man. He was helping in our work only because of his great liking for my uncle. As soon as our post was built, he would again go out with his woman upon his lone pursuit of the beaver. The Blackfeet had affectionately named him Great Hider, because he was so crafty in escaping from the enemy. He had had many thrilling escapes from the Assiniboin, the Sioux, and the Crows, and had killed so many of them that they had come to believe that he was proof against their arrows and bullets.

“Well, Sol,” said my uncle to him now, “it is best to have the horses right here in the barricade with us this night, don’t you think?”

“Sure thing! Right in here, and some of us on guard all night!” he answered.

Some of the men were sent to bring in the animals that were picketed near by, and Tsistsaki called Pitamakan and me to eat. Abbott presently came into our lodge, and my uncle and he decided upon the different watches for the night. Pitamakan, my uncle, and I were to take our turn

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at two o'clock and watch until daylight, about four o'clock, when the horses were to be taken out to graze. A night in the stockade would be no hardship to them, for the new grass was so luxuriant that they would eat all that they could hold.

Another point of discussion was whether the cannon should be loaded and made ready for the expected attack. Pitamakan and I were asked how many we thought there might be in the war party and replied that there were between fifteen and twenty men, certainly not more than twenty-five.

“Well, we'll load the cannon, because it should be loaded and kept loaded and the touchhole well protected from dampness,” said my uncle, “but we will not fire it at any small war party; our rifles can take care of them. We will just keep the cannon cached, as a surprise when a big war party comes.”

The lodge fires did not burn long that night. Pitamakan and I went to sleep while our elders were still smoking and talking.

Promptly on time Abbott came into our lodge

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and awakened us, and my uncle, Pitamakan, and I were soon in our places at the edge of the barricade. There was a piece of a moon, the stars were very bright, and in the north there was a perceptible whitish glow in the sky, as if from some far distant aurora playing upon the snow and ice of the always-winter land. Pitamakan, coming and standing at my side, said that Cold-Maker was dancing up there and making medicine for the attack upon the sun that he would begin a few moons hence.

“The old men, our wise ones, say,” he went on, “that Cold-Maker may sometime obtain what he is ever seeking, a medicine so powerful that it will enable him to drive the sun far, far into the south and keep him there. Think how terrible it would be! Our beautiful prairies and mountains would become an always-winter land! The game, the trees and brush and grasses, would all die off, and we, of course, should perish with them!”

“Don’t you worry about that!” I told him. “Sun has a certain trail to follow, and he is all-

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powerful. Let him make what medicine he may, old Cold-Maker cannot halt his course!"

"Ha! That is my thought, too. Wise though our old men are, they certainly don't know all about what is going on up there in the sky!"

Off to the south of us I heard my uncle mutter something about youthful philosophers and then laugh quietly.

From where we stood, with our shoulders and heads concealed by some brush stuck into the barricade, we could see the black mass of the grove and the silvery gleam of the river sweeping by it. The hush and quiet of the night were almost unbroken; not even an owl was hooting. The only sound that we could hear at all was the murmur of the river close under the cutbank on our left. The Missouri is a deceptive river. Though its heaving, eddying, swift flow is apparently without obstructions, yet it has a voice — an insistent, deep, plaintive voice that rises and falls and makes the listener imagine things; that seems to be trying to tell all the strange scenes and changes it has wit-

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nessed down through the countless ages of its being.

“Do you hear it, the voice, the singing of the river? Is n’t it beautiful?” I said.

“It is terrible, heart-chilling. What you hear is not the voice of the river; it is the singing of the dread Under-Water People who live down there in its depths and ever watch for a chance to drag us down to our death!”

My uncle slipped up behind us so quietly that we were startled. “You youngsters quit talking; use your eyes instead of your mouths!” he whispered, and stole back to his stand on the south side of the enclosure.

“We were and we are using our eyes, but maybe we were talking too loud; we will whisper from now on,” said Pitamakan.

“Do you think that the war party discovered our camp last evening?” I asked.

“They were coming this way and had plenty of time before dark to arrive in the grove down there where is all the chopping. No doubt they saw us

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ride out of the valley and along its rim. Yes, almost-brother, you may be sure that they have seen our camp. Will they try to break in here and take our horses? Hide in the grove and attack the men when they go to work? Go their way without attempting to trouble us? Ha! I wonder!"

An hour passed, perhaps more; and then from the direction of the grove we saw a dark form slowly approaching us; then came more forms, all upon hands and knees, sneaking through the grass like so many wolves.

Pitamakan nudged me with his elbow. "Don't shoot until they come quite close," he whispered. I answered him by pressing his arm.

Meantime my uncle had also discovered the enemy and now came to us, crouching low and stepping noiselessly; he got between us and whispered: "Aim at men at right and at left. I will shoot at a center man. Pull trigger when I say *now!*"

I selected my mark, the man at the extreme end of the line nearest the river, and anxiously awaited the word to fire. I thought that my uncle would

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never give it; the longer I aimed at my mark the worse my rifle seemed to wobble; the bead sight made circles all round the outline of the creeping man. At last, "Now!" or rather, "Kyi!" my uncle said and pulled the trigger as he said it. The flash from his gun blinded me for a moment, and I did not fire. But Pitamakan's rifle cracked, even a little before my uncle fired, and we heard a groan and a sharp cry of pain. My vision came back to me. I saw fifteen or twenty men running from us, making for the grove. I fired at one of them, and missed. After all my experience in shooting at night at the word of command, I had been too slow!

Right after I fired, the aroused men came running with weapons in hand, and the women, crouching low within the lodges, hushed the children as best they could.

"What is up? What did you fire at? Where is the enemy?" the men cried, crowding close to us. My uncle was hurriedly answering them when, from down near the grove, ten or twelve guns spit

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fire at us, and we heard several balls thud into the logs in front of us, and one ripped through the leather skin of a lodge. We ducked, and the men returned the enemy fire.

“Well, Wesley, I call this downright mean of you!” Sol Abbott said to my uncle reproachfully. “Why on earth did n’t you let us in on this? Why did n’t you call me, anyhow? Pluggin’ these here cut-throat night raiders is my long suit, and you know it! Here you’ve had all the sport yourself! ’T was n’t fair, by gum!”

“Oh, well, they were but few. I knew that they would run as soon as we fired. I did n’t think it worth while to awaken you. I really believe that I never gave you a thought.”

“You got one of them!” some one exclaimed.

“Two! Two of them are lying out there in the grass,” I said. I had had my eyes upon them all the time I was reloading my rifle.

“Perhaps they are not dead; we’ll go out and soon finish them off,” Abbott proposed.

“You shall not!” my uncle exclaimed. But he

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was too late; Pitamakan was already over the barricade and running to the enemy that he had shot. We saw him stoop over the fallen man, then rise with a bow and a shield that he waved aloft with his free hand.

“I count coup upon this enemy. I call upon you, Far Thunder, and you, almost-brother, to witness that I take these weapons from this enemy that I have killed!”

“We hear you!” I answered.

“Far Thunder,” he called to my uncle, “come and take the weapons of your kill!”

My uncle laughed. “I am past all that,” he began, but never finished what he intended to say.

“Far Thunder, my man,” Tsistsaki interrupted, “think how proud of you I shall be when those weapons out there are hung with the others that you have taken upon the walls of the home that we are building here! As you love me, go out and count your coup!”

So, to please her, and, I doubt not, with no little pride in what he had accomplished, my uncle went

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out to his fallen enemy and leaned over him; then, with a flintlock gun in his hand, he suddenly straightened up and cried, in the Blackfoot tongue, of course:

“I call upon you all to witness that I killed this man! I count coup upon one of our greatest enemies, a chief of the Assiniboin, Sliding Beaver!”

Oh, how we shouted when we heard that name! We could hardly believe our ears. And Tsistsaki sprang over the barricade and ran toward my uncle, crying, “Are you sure?” We all followed her and gathered round the fallen man, forgetting in the excitement of the moment that we were offering a large and compact mark to the guns of his followers. Day was beginning to break, and we could see the man’s features fairly well — the massive, big-nosed, cruel-mouthed face, with the broad scar across the forehead, mark of the lance of our chief, Big Lake.

“He is Sliding Beaver and no other!” Sol Abbott cried. “Wesley, my old friend, here’s to you! You sure have rid these plains of the most blood-

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thirsty rascal, the meanest, low-down murderer, that ever traipsed across them.”

No fear of the enemy could now hold back the other women of our camp. They came running to us with their children squawling after them, for the moment forgotten. Crowding round my uncle, they chanted over and over:

“A great chief is Far Thunder! Oho! Aha! Our enemy he has killed! He has killed Sliding Beaver, the cut-throat chief!”

“Well, what shall we do with him — and the other one?” I asked.

“Into the river they go!” Abbott answered. And in they went with big splashes. As they sank, Pitamakan cried out, “Under-Water People! We give to you these bodies! If you can injure them still more than we have done, we pray you to do so!”

It was now broad daylight. After the enemy had fired their lone, long-range volley at us we heard no more from them, nor could we see them; they were doubtless down in the grove. We returned to the stockade, and my uncle told a couple

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of the men to take the horses out to graze; but they did not go far out with them. The women hurried into the lodges and began preparing breakfast, singing, many of them, the song of victory. They were happy over the death of the dread Assiniboin chief. We remained outside, watching the valley and counting up the record of his terrible deeds, so far as we knew them. Trading entirely with the Hudson's Bay Company in Canada, he had always been an enemy of the American Fur Company and at various times had waylaid and killed eight of its trappers. Pitamakan said that he had killed four men and seven women of his tribe, and then recounted the well-known tale of his fight with Big Lake.

Leading about a hundred mounted warriors, Sliding Beaver had approached a camp of the Pikuni and signaled that he had come to fight its chief. The challenge was accepted, and presently Big Lake, armed with only a lance, rode out to meet him. The Assiniboin was carrying a gun and a bow and had no lance.

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“You proposed this fight, so you must use the weapons of my choice; go get a lance from your warriors.”

Sliding Beaver rode back to them, left his gun and bow, borrowed a lance, and, raising the Assiniboin war song in his terrible voice, — a thunderous voice it was, — wheeled his horse about and rode straight at Big Lake, who likewise charged at him. They neared each other at tremendous speed, and Big Lake tried to force his horse right against the other animal; but at the last Sliding Beaver turned the animal aside and they swept past. They lunged out with their lances, and Big Lake slightly wounded the Assiniboin in his shoulder, getting not even a scratch in return. Then again they charged, and Big Lake, sure that his enemy would not meet him fairly, swerved his horse to the right just as the other was doing likewise, dodged Sliding Beaver's thrust, and with his spear gave him a glancing blow on the forehead that laid open the skin, but failed to pierce the bone. But Sliding Beaver reeled in his saddle from the force

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of it, and a mighty shout went up from the Pikuni, for they thought he would fall from his horse.

He recovered his seat, however, and fled far, far out across the plain. Big Lake, try as he would, could not overtake him. His followers fled as soon as they saw that he was running away, and the Pikuni killed a number of them. The victory was without question with Big Lake; he had not only wounded Sliding Beaver in fair combat, but in the presence of a hundred of his warriors had proved him to be a coward.

“I’ll bet he told his warriors he had broken his lance and had to flee, and that he did break it against a rock before his men overtook him!” my uncle exclaimed.

Long afterwards we learned he had done that very thing.

The women presently called us all to eat. We washed and went inside, and Tsistsaki said to my uncle, “Chief, and chief-killer, be seated. Eat the food of chiefs!” Setting before him a huge dish of boiled boss ribs and a piece of berry pemmican

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as large as my two fists, she served Pitamakan and me equally large portions of the rich food, and gave us cups of strong coffee and slices of sour-dough bread. We ate with tremendous appetite, having been up so long, but I could see that my uncle was worried about something; I surmised what it was before he said: "Well, Thomas, our troubles begin. Without doubt Sliding Beaver's followers are cached down there in the grove. I dare not take the men to work this morning."

"What did he say?" Pitamakan asked Tsistsaki. She told him.

"I can see no help for it," said my uncle; "the men must remain in camp to-day, for those cut-throats are doubtless in the grove lying in wait."

"Yes, and they may remain there more than one day; they may hold up our work many days," Tsistsaki put in.

Just then we heard a woman cry, "Oh, look! Look! The cut-throats are going!"

We all ran outside and looked where she was pointing. Below the mouth of the Musselshell,

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the Missouri bent toward the south and swept the base of a high, cut bluff. The enemy were ascending it, heading, apparently, for the next bottom below. We counted seventeen men, about the number that we thought there should be.

“Ha! All is well!” my uncle cried. “Men, finish your breakfast and let us get to work!”

We went back to our lodge, and when Tsistsaki had poured us fresh coffee Pitamakan said to my uncle: “Far Thunder, those cut-throats could have sneaked away without our knowing it. I believe that they wanted us to see them going. Why? Because they intend to sneak back, perhaps to-day, maybe to-morrow, and surprise the men when they are working down there in the timber.”

Abbott had come in. My uncle turned to him and said: “You heard what he said. What do you think about it? What do you advise?”

“Well, how would it do for Thomas and Pitamakan to go down and watch that trail running over the bluff and on down the river, and for me to watch the breaks of the Musselshell and its valley

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above the grove? Then, if the cut-throats should come sneaking back, either the boys or I would discover them in time to warn you and the men."

"You have said it!" my uncle exclaimed. "You boys, take some middle-of-the-day food, saddle your horses, and go watch that trail!"

"Do I ride Is-spai-u?" I asked.

"Not to-day. Ride the men's horses, you two. Any old plug is fast enough to keep out of the way of a war party on foot."

Pitamakan and I were not long in getting off. We rode down through the head of the grove, crossed the Musselshell and went on, not upon the trail that the enemy had followed, but above it along the steep bad-land slope, until we could see the whole length of the trail from the junction of the two rivers on down into the next bottom, where there was a thin fringe of cottonwoods and willows.

We got down from our horses, tethered them to some juniper-brush, and scooped out comfortable sitting-places upon the steep slope. From where

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we sat the lower end of the grove at the mouth of the Musselshell was in sight, and well beyond it on the high ground that bordered the Missouri was our barricaded camp. Looking again into the bottom below, we saw a small bunch of bighorns, old rams apparently, heading down into its lower end; going to drink at the river, of course. Bighorns were plentiful then and for many years afterwards in all the Missouri bad-land country. A fine early morning breeze was blowing down the valley. I called Pitamakan's attention to it, and said that, if the enemy were concealed in the timber, the bighorns would apprise us of the fact. Bighorns leave their cliffs and steep slopes only when need of water or of food compels them to do so. Those we were watching traveled freely enough down the slope, but the moment they stepped out upon the level bottom land they became timid, advancing but a few steps at a time and pausing to sniff the air and stare in all directions. In this manner they crossed the narrow bottom, descended the gravelly shore below the end of the timber, and drank. We had

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proof enough that the Assiniboinns were not in the timber.

“The gods are with us; they make the animals do scout work for us!” Pitamakan exclaimed.

“I am wholly of the opinion that the cut-throats are upon their homeward way,” I said, “and that they will return with a couple of hundred warriors and try to wipe us out!”

“Yes, sooner or later we are in for a fight with them. But something tells me we are not yet through with Sliding Beaver’s men.”

We sprang to our feet. The west wind brought plainly to our ears the sound of shots and yells up in the big grove and the frightened cries of women in our camp above it.

“There! What did I tell you!” Pitamakan exclaimed.

“How in the world could they have got back in there without our knowing it?” I cried.

CHAPTER IV

THE STEAMBOAT REFUSES TO STOP

WE ran to our horses, untethered and mounted them, and rode toward the grove as fast as we could make them lope along the steep, soft slope. The firing and yelling had ceased as suddenly as it had begun. I was almost trembling with anxiety. Was it possible that the enemy by a surprise attack had killed my uncle and all his men? Pitamakan, whose horse was the faster of the two, was in the lead. I belabored mine with heels and rope. When we quartered down to the river trail for the sake of the better going, the rise of the bluff ahead of us cut off our view of the grove and our camp. Then, as we neared the foot of the bluff, two of the enemy appeared on top of it.

“Our men are pursuing them! We’ve got them! Come on!” Pitamakan shouted back to me.

We were perhaps a hundred yards from the foot of the bluff, and on our right, about the same dis-

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tance off, was the cutbank of the river. We rode on faster than ever and saw the two men crouch, one with ready bow and the other with pointed gun. Then, as we arrived at the foot of the slope, they suddenly sprang up and retreated out of our sight, and Pitamakan yelled again to me, "We've got them! Come on!"

Our horses panted up the slope, groaning and grunting their protests at every whack of our ropes. We topped the rise, and Pitamakan's horse shied at a couple of robes lying close to the trail. Beyond, a couple of hundred yards away, we saw my uncle and his men running toward us; he stopped at sight of us and signed, "Go out! They went down off the end of the bluff!"

We loped to the end of the bank and looked down. It was not a perpendicular bluff; it sloped to the river at an angle of about eighty degrees. Two fresh streaks in the dark and crumbling surface showed where the cut-throats had slid down into the water.

We looked out upon the swift-running river, but

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could not see the men. Presently they appeared in the center fully three hundred yards downstream, swimming swiftly and powerfully toward the far shore. We sprang from our horses in order to take steady aim at them, but both dived before we could fire. Holding our weapons ready, we watched eagerly for them to reappear. But, incredible as it may seem, we never saw them again until they emerged on the shore five hundred yards below. They turned and waved their arms at us derisively, and then slowly walked into the willows that lined the edge of the river.

“Oh, how disappointed I am! When they turned back from us there at the top of the rise, I was sure that I should soon count another coup,” Pitamakan lamented.

We turned now to meet the men who were hurrying toward us and who were almost winded by their steep climb. “Where are they?” my uncle gasped.

“Across the river!” I answered.

I happened to look off at our camp. “A rider is at the barricade,” I said.

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“Abbott, no doubt, quieting the women,” said my uncle, and added in Blackfoot so that Pita-makan would understand, “Well, they killed the Curlew! Shot him in the back of the head, poor fellow!”

“Poor Louis! His troubles are over,” I said. I was sorry that we were never again to hear him bewailing in his falsetto voice the loss of his pension and his endless other worries.

My uncle went on to explain to us just what had happened. The Assiniboina had climbed out of the valley in plain view of us, leaving two of their number, who were probably near relatives of Sliding Beaver, to avenge the chief's death. Those two had lain concealed in the thick willows at the upper end of the chopping. Arriving in the timber, all of our men except Louis, who had gone farther up in the grove to trim and cut into proper lengths a cottonwood that he had previously felled, had begun loading logs on the wagons. Then a gun had boomed right behind Louis; he had toppled over, dead, and the two cut-throats had rushed out to

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scalp him. The men had fired and had driven them back into the willows before they had accomplished their purpose, and they had run toward the river trail with my uncle and some of his men after them.

It was evident that the two had not seen or heard Pitamakan and me ride past the head of the grove toward the river trail; we believed that it had been planned to kill as many of our men in the grove as they could, and to decoy us down the river, where we might be ambushed by the main party.

By the time we got back into the grove the men who had been left with the teams had dug a grave for poor Louis, and one of them had been to camp with the news of his passing. We buried him while his woman mourned for him and the other women cried in sympathy.

My uncle had the men knock off work early that afternoon so that the horses should have ample time to eat before we brought them into the stockade for the night. Then, while waiting for our evening meal, my uncle, Abbott, Pitamakan, and I held a war council out by the river-bank, where

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the men would not overhear our talk. They were a timid lot, French engagés all of them, and we did not want them to suspect how serious we thought our situation to be.

“The older I grow the less sense I have! I should have known better than to come down here with these few timid engagés to build a fort upon the most traveled war trail in the country,” said my uncle. “I should have had ten — yes, twenty — more men. I shall send by the next up-river boat for all the men that can be engaged in Fort Benton.”

“Yes, we are in a risky position,” said Abbott. “This war party may be right back at us to-night; they may keep hanging round until they get more of us. If they have started home, they will be coming again as fast as they can get here with a big war party. We do need a lot more men, but I doubt whether even ten more can be engaged in Fort Benton.”

“Far Thunder! Almost-brother! Listen to me!” Pitamakan exclaimed. “Not uselessly are we mem-

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bers of the Pikuni; we have but to let our people know what danger we are in, and a hundred of them will come to help us as fast as their horses can carry them. They are just two days' ride from Fort Benton at their camp on Bear River. Send for them, Far Thunder, and we will do our best to survive the dangers here until they join us."

"Ha! That is a life-saving plan you have in that good head of yours! I will get a letter about it ready right away; a steamboat may turn the bend down there at any moment! Carroll and Steell will lose no time in getting a messenger off to camp for us!"

"One more thing," Abbott interposed as my uncle rose to leave us. "If those cut-throats are going to sneak back into the grove again to-night and attack us, we have to know it. I propose that these two boys and I stand watch down there until morning."

My uncle agreed to that, and we went in to eat supper.

At early dusk Abbott, Pitamakan, and I went

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down into the grove, accompanied by all the men and women in a compact group. Then all the others turned back to camp. If the enemy were watching us from the breaks, they could not possibly count those who went to and from the grove, and so learn that three of us were remaining in it.

More than once during the night our hearts went thumpety-thump at the approach of dim and shadowy objects, but the objects always proved to be elk or deer. Pitamakan watched the river trail, I the breaks from the middle edge of the grove; Abbott had his stand at the upper end. Along toward morning I got a real scare when an animal that I thought was a stray buffalo proved to be a big grizzly coming straight toward me. I did not know what to do. If I ran, he would probably chase me; if I fired at him, I might only wound him — it was too dark to shoot accurately. I looked about for a tree small enough to climb, saw one, and was on the point of running to it, when the bear turned off sharply and I heard him slosh through the river.

We maintained our watch until my uncle came

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down with the men in the morning and stationed some of them to take our places. We thus had only six men at work; at that rate we should be all summer and winter building the fort! As we three were starting toward camp, my uncle told us that Tsistsaki was to stand watch there over the picketed horses and that we were to sleep as long as we could.

At about four o'clock in the afternoon, Tsistsaki roused us from our heavy sleep with the news that the smoke of a steamboat was in sight down the river. Springing from our couches and running outside, we saw the black column of smoke about two miles away, and I went down into the grove to notify my uncle. He hurried back to camp with me and got ready his letter to Carroll and Steell, and put it into a sack with a stone, so that he could throw it aboard; then we all went out to the bank of the river and waited for the boat to come in close at our hail. It presently rounded the bend a mile or more below and headed up the center of the broad, straight stretch. How interested I was in watching it, this freighter from far St. Louis! It had left the

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city only thirty or forty days before; what a lot we could learn of the news in the States if we could have a chat with its crew! I said as much to Abbott, and he exclaimed, "Oh, shucks! Who wants to know about the hide-bound, cut-and-dried, two-penny affairs and doings in the States! Here is where life is real life! Why, a fellow can get more excitement here in a day than in a lifetime back there!"

The steamboat came steadily on against the swift current, and as soon as it had passed the bar below the mouth of the Musselshell we fired several shots, and Pitamakan waved his blanket to attract the attention of the captain and the pilot; but the boat never changed its course, and after a few moments of anxious suspense my uncle exclaimed, "Is it possible that the captain does not intend to come in to us? Fire a couple more shots! Pitamakan, wave your blanket again."

We fired, waved our blanket and arms, and shouted. The crew on the lower deck and a few passengers on the hurricane deck came to the rail

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and waved greeting to us, and the man standing beside the pilot, evidently the captain, stuck his head out of the side window of the wheelhouse and looked at us, but still the boat held its course well over toward the farther shore; the captain intended to pay no attention to our signals. That he should not do so was almost unbelievable! My uncle turned red with anger. "The hounds! They are going to pass me! Me! A company man! That captain shall smart for this! Can you make out the name?"

I read the name on the wheelhouse. "It is the Pittsburgh," I told him.

"Ha! That explains it," he said. "It is not a company boat. This is its first trip up the river. The captain is sure a mean man; he will never get any of my custom!"

"But, Wesley, seems to me you've just got to get that letter aboard," said Abbott.

"Yes, I have to! It can be done, and it must! Thomas, Pitamakan, saddle up, you two, chase that boat, and when it ties up for the night —"

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“I had better go with them, don’t you think? There’s no telling what they may run up against,” Abbott said to him.

My uncle scratched his chin and frowned as he always did when perplexed, and after some thought exclaimed, “Well, I can’t let the three of you go! The men down there in the timber are about as timid a set of sheep as ever was. No, Abbott, you’ll have to help me here, and the boys must do the best they can.”

Pitamakan ran for the horses. I did not ask whether I were to ride Is-spai-u; I just brought him in and put the saddle on him. Pitamakan saddled my runner, for, as you know, his fast horse had had his shoulder gashed by a bullet. My uncle handed me the letter and told us to be very cautious, but to get it aboard the boat at any cost. Tsistsaki came running out and handed us some sandwiches, and we were off.

The Upper Missouri Valley is the worst country in all the West for the rider. It is fine enough going in the wooded or grassy bottoms of varying lengths,

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but between the bottoms are steep slopes and ridges that break abruptly off into the winding river, and that are so seamed with coulees, many of them with quicksand beds, that they are well-nigh impassable.

I did not intend that we should follow the valley until obliged to do so. On leaving camp we rode on the plain and followed it from breakhead to breakhead. Occasionally we got a glimpse of the valley far below and of the smoke of the steamboat puffing its way up the river. We were soon in the lead of it, for, while we were making seven or eight miles an hour on a straight course, it was going no faster than that on a course as crooked as the body of a writhing snake. From the time we topped the rise above camp we were continually pushing into great herds of buffaloes and antelopes.

On and on we rode until the lowering sun warned us that we must keep close track of the progress of the steamboat. We turned down a little way into the breaks, looking for a well-worn game trail to follow, and soon found one. I never went along one of those bad-land trails without wondering how far

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back in the remote past it had been broken by a band of thirsty buffaloes heading down from the plains to water. Since that time how many, many thousands of them had traveled it!

When part way down the long incline, and still all of two miles from the river, we came to a sharp turn in the ridge, and from it saw the smoke of the steamboat, not, as we had expected, somewhere down the river, but all of three or four miles above the point where we should enter the bottom.

The sun had set, and the night was already stealing down into the valley; the boat would soon be tied up. There was not a pilot on the river that would venture to guide a steamboat up or down it even in the light of a full moon, and this night there would be no moon until near morning.

“Almost-brother, we have some hard traveling to do!” I said.

“We each have good legs. When our horses fail us, we will use them,” Pitamakan answered.

The bottom that we were heading into proved to be all of a mile long, and we traversed it and went

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over a rather easy point into the next bottom before real night set in. We had starlight then, just enough light to enable us to see in a rather uncertain way forty or fifty feet ahead of our horses. Midway up the bottom we came to the first of our troubles, a cut coulee that ran across it from the bad lands to the river. We turned up along it almost to the slope of the valley before Pitamakan, on foot and leading his horse, found a game trail that crossed it. Presently we arrived at the point at the head of the bottom, and could find no trail leading up it, in itself a bad sign. We both dismounted and began the ascent. Our horses' feet sank deep into the sun-baked, surface-glazed volcanic ash with a ripping, crunching sound as if they were breaking through snow crust. Almost before we knew it we found ourselves on a steep slope with a cut bluff above us and the murmuring river below us. Our horses began to slip.

"We shall have to make a quick run for it!" Pitamakan called back to me.

The horses slipped and frantically pawed up-

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ward in a strenuous effort to avoid plunging down into the river. We made it and, gasping for breath, found ourselves upon the gently sloping ground of the next bottom.

“Almost we went into the river!” Pitamakan exclaimed.

“Don’t talk about it!” I replied.

“The Under-Water People almost got us!”

“Oh, do be quiet! Mount and lead on, or let me lead!” I cried.

We went on up through that bottom, across a point, through another bottom and over a very rough point seamed with coulees. In the next bottom I called a halt. “The boat must be somewhere close ahead. We can no longer travel outside the timber; from here on we have to see both shores of the river —”

“It will be impossible for us to see the far shore,” Pitamakan broke in.

“Of course. But the boat has lights burning all night long. We shall see them,” I explained.

We mounted, and I took the lead into the timber

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close ahead. I let my horse pick his way, reining him only sufficiently to keep him close to the river and guiding myself by its sullen murmur. We groped our way through the timber of that bottom and of another; then from the next bare point we saw the lights of the boat some little distance up the river against the blackness of the north shore.

We rode through a belt of cottonwoods and some willows to the head of the bottom and then out upon a sandy shore right opposite the boat. White though it was, we could see nothing of it except its two lights, and they were so faint that we knew the river was of great width. We dismounted, and I told Pitamakan that I would fire my rifle to attract the attention of the watchman, and then shout to him, as loudly as possible, to send a small boat across for us.

I fired the shot; it boomed loudly across the water and echoed sharply against the other shore. "Ahoy, there! We want to come aboard!" I shouted, waited for an answer, and got none. Again I shouted, with the same result.

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“Now you fire your rifle!” I told Pitamakan.

He fired it, and then we did get an answer. The flash of a dozen guns for an instant illuminated the white paint of the boat, and with the dull booming of them we heard several bullets strike in the trees behind us!

CHAPTER V

TWO CROWS RAISE THEIR RIGHT HANDS

WE got back into the timber in no time. "The crazy ones! They think that we are enemies!"

"Well," I said in answer to this dismayed exclamation of Pitamakan's, "you know what we have to do now; swim across with our letter."

"And be shot as soon as we are seen!"

"Not a shot will be fired at us. I'll see to that. Come, let us picket the horses outside the timber and hunt for a couple of dry logs for a raft," I told him.

Let me tell you that it was no fun blundering along that shore in the darkness, testing the logs we stumbled against for their dryness and trying to roll them into the water, always with the fear of feeling rattlesnake fangs burn into our hands. At last we got two logs of fair size into the water side by side and lashed them firmly together with wil-

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low withes. Lashing our clothing and weapons on top of a pile of brush in the center, we pushed out into the current — but not until Pitamakan had called upon his gods to protect us from the dread Under-Water People. He clung to the front end of the unwieldy logs with one hand, pawed the water with the other, and kicked rapidly. I did likewise at the rear of the raft, but for all our efforts we could make the raft go toward the other shore little faster than the current would take it.

It was absolutely certain that the raft would not waterlog and sink during the time that we had use for it, yet it was with feelings of dread and suspense that we worked our way well out into the center of the stream. Then Pitamakan suddenly yelled to me: "The Under-Water People! They are after us! Kick hard! Hard!"

"Oh, no! You are mistaken!" I told him.

"I am sure that they are after us!" he cried. "I touched one of them with my hand, and he hit me in my side. O sun, pity us! Help us to survive this danger!"

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“Take courage! So long as we cling to the logs they can’t drag us down,” I told him.

“Oh, you don’t understand about these Under-Water People! They can do terrible things. They are medicine.”

He said no more, nor did I. It was useless for me to tell him that he had encountered a big catfish or sturgeon swimming lazily near the surface.

From where we pushed out into the river to the point where we landed must have been all of a mile. We dragged the raft out upon the sand as far as we could in case we should want to use it again and then put on our clothes and started off up the shore. In a little while, looking out through the brush and timber, we saw the ghostly outline of the steamboat close upon our left. Silently we stole to the edge of the sloping bank and looked down upon it. A reflector lantern lighted the lower deck and the boilers, flanked with cordwood, and there was a light shining through the windows of the engine-room; but no one was in sight, not even the watchman. I believed that a number of men were on

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guard and did not intend to take any chances with them. I whispered to Pitamakan that the time had not come for us to make our presence known, and we sat down right where we were in the brush.

Presently a big clock somewhere abaft the boilers struck the hour of three, and a tall, lank, black-whiskered man came out into the light of the lower deck and began to arouse men sitting or lying behind the rows of cordwood. "It is three o'clock," I heard him snarl. "Git a move on you! Light the fires under them boilers!"

Three or four men sprang to obey the command, and another went up to the hurricane deck to arouse the cook and his helpers.

"Hi, there, mate, throw out the gangplank and let us aboard!" I shouted.

Black whiskers jumped as if he had been shot and dodged behind a boiler; the men crouched in the shelter of the cordwood.

"Don't be afraid and don't shoot at us again. Let us aboard!" I said.

"Who be you?" the mate shouted from his shel-

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ter. "Git down there into the light and show yourself!"

I told Pitamakan to remain where he was, and, going down to the edge of the shore where the light streamed upon me, I explained that I was Thomas Fox, that I had an Indian with me, and that I had a letter to deliver into the captain's care.

"Sounds fishy to me," the mate began; then from the upper deck a deep voice called, "Slim, you let that boy and his friend on board! I know him!" And to me, "Hello, Thomas, my boy! I'm dressing. Come up to my room as soon as you get aboard and tell me all about it!"

"That I will, Mr. Page," I answered. I knew as soon as he spoke that it was Henry Page, long a pilot for the American Fur Company, and now, of course, piloting boats for the independents.

Out came the gangplank. I called to Pitamakan, and we went aboard and straight up to Mr. Page, while the mate and his men stared after us. In a few words I explained why we were there.

"I knew," he said, "it was your Uncle Wesley

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and his outfit there at the mouth of the Musselshell. I learned at Fort Union that he is starting a fort there, but the captain would n't let me turn in when you signaled. I'll bet you had a rough time coming up here and getting across the river." Then he lowered his voice. "This captain — Wiggins is his name — is the meanest steamboat man that ever headed up this river!"

"Maybe he will not set us across the river, nor even deliver the letter," I hazarded.

"Give me the letter. I'll deliver it, and I'll put you across right now," he replied, and led the way down to the lower deck and ordered a boat put into the water.

On our way across I explained to our good friend the danger we were in from a grand attack upon us by the Assiniboins and how urgent it was that the Pikuni should get our call for help without delay.

"Well, I believe I have good news for you and your uncle," he said. "I happened to hear in Fort Union that the Assiniboins are encamped over on the Assiniboin River in Canada; so they are far-

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ther from the mouth of the Musselshell than your Pikuni over on the Marias River are. I feel sure that your friends will be with you in good time for the big battle, if there is to be one.”

“In that letter to Carroll and Steell that you have my uncle also asks them to send him any loose men that can be engaged in Fort Benton. I hope that your captain will give them passage and land them at our place.”

“He has to land passengers wherever they wish to go. I’ll try, myself, to engage some men for you,” he replied.

Then we struck the shore and with a few last words parted from our good friend.

“It would n’t do any harm to have a short sleep before we start back,” said Pitamakan.

“No sleep for me until I strike my couch in our lodge,” I told him.

By that time day was breaking. We went out through the timber to our horses and found that we had picketed them upon really good grass and plenty of it. We saddled them and watered them at

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the river, and as we rode away from it the steamboat slipped her moorings and went on upstream.

Without adventure upon the way we arrived in camp at noon just as the men were returning to it for their dinner.

“Did you deliver the letter?” my uncle shouted eagerly.

“We did!” I shouted.

Later, while we were eating, I told the adventures of the night while Pitamakan held Tsistsaki and the other women spellbound with his description of the dangers that we had encountered. They made no comment other than a casual “Kyai-yo!” when he told of the steamboat men’s firing at us, but his description of our swim and his encounter with the Under-Water Person brought forth cries of horror.

My listeners were loud in their denunciation of the steamboat captain. My uncle vowed that the Pittsburgh should never carry a bale of his furs to St. Louis or bring up freight for him.

“Well, boys,” my uncle said to the men as they

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were starting back to work, "there's this much about it: help is sure coming to us. We'll just peg along the best we can and trust to luck that all will be well with us."

Abbott was asleep, having been on guard all night. Pitamakan and I soon lay down and slept. At supper-time we got up and had a refreshing bath in the river, where Abbott joined us, and toward dusk we three went to guard the grove during the night. My uncle arranged with the engagés to stand watch in the barricade by turns, for he was completely worn out by his day-and-night work and had to have one night of complete rest.

The night passed quietly; when morning came we were all convinced that Sliding Beaver's followers and survivors had gone on to their camp. Nevertheless, we did not intend to relax our vigilance.

According to my uncle's plan of the fort, three hundred and ten logs, twenty feet long and a foot in diameter, were required for the walls and the roof supports, and for the two bastions ninety logs

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twelve feet long were required. Of that large number only a few more than a hundred had been hauled out. With our present force we could not possibly build the fort in less than three months. At Abbott's suggestion that he build upon a much smaller scale, my uncle had replied, "No, sir! This place calls for a real fort, a commodious fort. I am going to have it or none at all."

On that day Pitamakan and I slept until noon and after dinner saddled Is-spai-u and my runner and rode out for meat, I, of course, upon the black.

There were plenty of buffaloes in the valley not more than a mile above camp. Pitamakan and I rode down into the grove to notify my uncle to have a man follow us with a team and wagon, for we intended to make a quick killing. Sneaking through the timber close to a herd of buffaloes and chasing them across the flat, we killed four fat ones. We hurriedly butchered them and helped the engagés to load the meat upon the wagon; then we remounted our horses.

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Off to the south lay country unknown to me. "Come! Let us ride out upon discovery," I said to Pitamakan.

"I knew that was in your mind by the way you used your knife on our kills," he replied.

We rode out upon the west rim of the valley, following it to the mouth of the Sacajawea Creek, which we crossed, then again along the rim for perhaps five miles to the top of a flat butte from which we had a wonderful view of the country. Pitamakan pointed out to me where Flat Willow Creek and Box Elder Creek, at the nearest point about forty miles to the south of us, broke into the Musselshell from the Snowy Mountains. Both streams, he said, were from their mouths to their heads just one beaver pond after another.

We had, of course, disturbed numerous bands of buffaloes and antelopes along our way up the rim, and now, turning down into the valley of the Musselshell on our homeward course, we alarmed more of them.

"If any war parties are cached along here in the

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timber," said Pitamakan, "these running herds are putting them upon their guard!"

"Let us keep well out from the timber," I proposed.

I had no more than spoken when two men came walking slowly out from a grove about two hundred yards ahead of us, each with his right hand raised above his head, the sign for peace.

"Ha! Maybe they mean that, and maybe they are setting a trap for us; we must be cautious," said Pitamakan.

We advanced slowly until we were about a hundred yards from the signalers and brought our horses to a stand.

"Who are you?" I signed to them.

One of them, dropping his bow and arrows, extended his arms and rapidly raised and lowered them several times in imitation of the wings of a bird, the sign for the Crow tribe. Then he waved his right hand above his shoulder, the query sign that I had made.

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"We want nothing to do with them," Pitamakan said to me hurriedly.

I signed that I was white.

"The rider with you, who is he? Where are you camped? Let us be friends and go together to your camp," the Crow signed. Then his companion added, "Come, let us meet and sit and smoke a peace pipe. We are two, you are two. It will be good for the four of us to be friends and smoke."

"What a lie! Now I am sure they want to trap us! Signing to us that they are but two! Close behind them the timber is full of Crows!" Pitamakan muttered.

"What shall we do?" I asked him. "Cross the river, ride off beyond the breaks, where they can't see us, and then turn homeward?"

"It would be useless to do that. They are bound north and will see our camp; we may as well make a straight ride to it."

"Well, then, we go," I said and pressed a heel against Is-spai-u's side.

Away we went, circling out from the grove; and

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our horses had not made four jumps when a number of Crows — at least twenty, we thought — sprang from the timber and discharged their few guns at us while the bow-and-arrow men raised the Crow war cry and uselessly flourished their weapons. Several of the bullets whizzed uncomfortably close to us.

Pitamakan was about to return their fire when I checked him. "Don't fire! We have enough trouble to face!" I cried.

Our swift horses carried us out of their range before they could load and fire their guns again.

"More trouble for us, I'm sure!" my uncle exclaimed, as we halted our sweating horses in front of the barricade just before sunset.

"Yes, a war party of twenty or twenty-five Crows fired at us. They seem to be heading this way," I replied, and told him and the men all about our meeting them, while Pitamakan answered the women's questions.

When I had finished, the engagés, Abbott excepted, of course, wore pretty long faces. They

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all went into Henri Robarre's lodge as we, with Abbott, answered Tsistsaki's call to supper.

We had barely finished eating, when Robarre came to the door of our lodge and asked my uncle to step outside. We all went out and found the men lined up near the passageway in the barricade.

"Huh! Still more trouble!" my uncle muttered. Then to them he said, "Well, my men, what is it?"

They looked at one another and at us hesitatingly, and several of them nudged Henri Robarre. After much urging he stepped forward and said to my uncle:

"Sare, M'sieu' Reynard! We hare mos' respec' hask dat we have hour discharge. Dat we hem-bark for Fort Benton on ze firs' boat dat weel take hus."

"Ha! You want to quit, do you? What is the trouble? Am I not treating you well?"

"Wait! They are to have a big surprise," said Tsistsaki and turned from us back to the lodges.

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“Sare, M’sieu’ Reynard,” Henry continued, “eet ees no you. You hare one fine mans. Les sauvages, Assiniboins, Crows, many more zat wee’ come, he are ze troub’, m’sieu’.”

“But you can’t go back on your contracts!” my uncle exclaimed. “You all agreed to come down here and work for me a year; you signed contracts to that effect.”

“Sare, honneur, we hare no sign eet ze pap’ for fight heem, les sauvages. We no sign eet ze pap’ for work all days and watch for les sacrés sauvages hall ze nights. Pretty soon we hall gets keel, m’sieu’. We hare no pour le combat; we hare jus’ pauvre cordeliers, engagés in ze forts. M’sieu’, you weel let hus go?”

I knew by the set expression of my uncle’s face what his answer was to be, but he never gave it. Out came the women; their eyes were blazing, long braids were streaming, and they carried lodge-fire sticks in their hands. They charged upon their men, crying, “Cowards! You shall not desert our chief! Stay in the lodge and do our work; we’ll

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build the fort! Give us your clothing; you shall wear our gowns!”

Never shall I forget that scene! The poor engagés shrank from the attack. Wild-eyed, they begged the women to desist, all the while getting painful whacks from their sticks and the most terrible tongue-lashing that could be given in the Blackfoot language! My uncle and Abbott laughed at their plight, and Pitamakan and I actually rolled upon the ground in a perfect frenzy of joy. When, at last, we sat up and wiped our eyes, there were the engagés heading for their lodges, and each one was followed by his woman, still shrieking out her candid opinion of him.

“Well, I guess that settles it!” Abbott exclaimed.

It did! When my uncle called the men together and gave out the detail of the night watch, not one of them made objection, and never again did they ask for their discharge.

With the setting of the sun, Abbott, Pitamakan, and I went down into the grove to our accustomed

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place, Abbott at the head of the grove and we at its east side. We fully expected that the Crow war party, repeating the tactics of the Assiniboin, would sneak into the grove during the night with the intention of making a surprise attack upon the men when they resumed work in it in the morning. It was agreed that, if they did come, we were to withdraw without letting them know, if possible, that we had seen them. That would mean, as my uncle remarked with a heavy sigh, that the grove would be given over to the enemy for an indefinite time, during which work on the fort would, of course, be suspended. Pitamakan said that, in his opinion, the war party, having had a good view of Is-spai-u and doubtless believing him to be the wonderful buffalo-runner they had heard about, would be far more likely to try to sneak him out of our camp than they would be to ambush us in the grove.

To our great astonishment the night passed without the Crows appearing either at the grove or at the barricade. We did not know what to

Two Crows Raise their Right Hands

think. Was it possible, Abbott asked, that the party was homeward bound to the Crow country across the Yellowstone after an unsuccessful raid north of the Missouri?

“War parties seldom go home on foot,” Pitamakan well replied.

As soon as my uncle came into the timber with the men and placed his guards and set the six to work we three watchers returned to the barricade, had breakfast, and turned in for the sleep we so much needed. The day and the following night passed quietly; and when the next day and night passed without our detecting any signs of the Crow war party, we said to one another that it had gone its way without discovering our camp.

The third day after our meeting the Crows came. After watering and picketing the saddle-horses close to the barricade, the men hitched up the teams as usual and came into the grove, and Pitamakan, Abbott, and I went to camp, had our morning meal, and as usual took to our couches. We had not been asleep more than three hours,

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when Tsistsaki came into the lodge and shook us by turns until we were wide-awake. "Take your gun and hurry out!" she said with suppressed excitement. "Several clumps of sagebrush are moving upon us!"

CHAPTER VI

ABBOTT FIRES INTO A CLUMP OF SAGEBRUSH

WHAT do you mean? Sagebrush can't move," I said to her.

"Oh, yes, it can when enemies are behind it, pushing it along!" she cried. "Hurry! Follow me and stoop low so that you cannot be seen over the top of the barricade."

Tsistsaki led us to the south side of the barricade, and, lining us up beside her to look through the narrow space between the top log and the one next it, told us to watch the sagebrush beyond the picketed saddle-horses.

They were upon smooth grass. A hundred yards or so farther on were scattering growths of sage and of greasewood, the outer border of a growth that two hundred yards beyond became a solid tract of brush from three to four feet high, which extended a long way up the valley. I noticed at once that here and there with the near growth of

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short bushes were taller, thicker clumps that seemed to be out of place; and as I looked one of them advanced a foot or two with a gentle quivering of its top.

At the same time Pitamakan exclaimed: "She is right! Sagebrush can move. Behind every one of those tall bushes is an enemy!"

"Sneaking in after Is-spai-u!" I said.

"There are twenty or more of them. If they knew that we are but three guns here, they would rush in upon us in no time!" said Abbott.

"Oh, you talk, talk! Quick! Do something! Save Is-spai-u!" Tsistsaki hoarsely whispered.

"If we rush out there," said Pitamakan, "the enemy will know that they are discovered and will charge in and fight us for the horses. Almost-brother, you and I will wander out there, just as if we were going to water the horses. The enemy will surely think that is our intention, but we will lead them toward the river, then bring them round the north side of the barricade and into it."

"Now, that is a sure wise plan. Go ahead, you

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two, and meanwhile Tsistsaki and I will get the loud-mouthed gun across to this south-side firing-place," said Abbott.

There was here, as in a number of places round the barricade, a brush-covered space through which the six-pounder could be pointed. The women of the engagés were in their lodges, and Tsistsaki whispered to us that she had not told them of her discovery for fear some of them would make an outcry.

Pitamakan and I sneaked back into the lodge for our blankets and put them on, first, however, sticking our rifles under our belts and pressing them close along the left side and leg; then we walked carelessly out through the passageway of the barricade. We were talking and laughing, but you may be sure our laughter was forced. When we were twenty or thirty feet from the barricade he said to me, "Let us pause here and have a look at the country."

We halted and looked first to the north, then down to the grove, from which both teams were

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emerging with wagons loaded with logs. There were three engagés with the outfit. I pointed to them. "What would they do if they knew what is ahead of them?"

"They would fly! Their fear would be so great that it would give them power to grow wings instantly!" Pitamakan grimly answered.

Fear! Well, I was afraid, and so was my almost-brother. Who would not be afraid in such a situation — just three of us against twenty or more enemies watching and planning how to get away with our horses and our scalps, too?

We turned to face the south and scrutinized the tall, thick clumps of sagebrush standing among the shorter, scattered growth. They never moved, not so much as a quiver of their slender, pale-green tops.

Pitamakan broke out with a quick-time dance-song of his people and danced a few steps to it as we neared the horses. I sauntered up to Is-spai-u, he to his fast runner, and we unfastened and coiled their ropes. Leading them, we moved on to one



AT LAST WE HAD ALL THE HORSES IN LEAD AND WITH FAST-BEATING HEARTS . . .
STARTED TOWARD THE RIVER

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after another of the other four horses, ever with watchful eyes upon those clumps of sage, the nearest of which was not more than a hundred yards away. We feared every moment to see them thrown down and the enemy come charging upon us; but at last we had all the horses in lead and with fast-beating hearts and rising hopes started toward the river, never once looking back, much though we wanted to. Pitamakan seemed to know my thought, for he said cheerily: "Never mind; you don't need to look back. If they make a rush, Great Hider and Tsistsaki will shout before they can make two jumps toward us."

Ha! What a long, long way those few yards were to the shelter of the stockade. At last we rounded it. Breathing freer, we passed along the north side, led the horses in through the passageway, turned them loose, and put up the bars across it. Then we pretended to go into our lodge, but crouched away from the doorway and sneaked over to the two watchers kneeling at either side of the cannon and looking out across the flat.

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“You made it! My! That little song and dance of Pitamakan’s, that sure fooled ’em! He is some actor, that boy,” Abbott said.

“Well, what are we to do now — fire the cannon at them? Give them a big scare?” I asked.

“I don’t know what to say. If only Far Thunder were here — ” Abbott began.

“He is coming. Look!” said Tsistsaki.

Sure enough, he was on his way to dinner with three men, leaving three to guard the grove, as usual. The teams were almost to the site of the fort. I went out to meet them and told the men to take the horses into the barricade.

“But the horses, they should be heat ze grass. Yes?” one of them said, and all looked at me questioningly.

“Well, maybe we shall have a fight before we eat. A war party is cached out there in the sagebrush,” I replied; and they shrank back as if I had struck them. At the same time I heard some slight commotion within the barricade. At Abbott’s suggestion Tsistsaki was warning the women of our

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impending trouble and commanding them to make no outcry.

“Shut your mouth!” I hissed to one of the teamsters, who with upflung arms was beginning to make great outcry. “Not a word from any of you now. Just get those horses inside; then pretend to go to your lodges, but sneak across to the south side and remain there.”

I stood by the passageway until the others arrived, and when I had told them, too, what to do, my uncle said to me as we went crouching in across the barricade, “The war party is undoubtedly the Crow outfit that you met the other day.”

We joined the others, and Abbott said to him, “We’ve had a pretty close call, Wesley.”

“Just where are the rascals? Let me see them!” my uncle demanded. He laughed grimly when we had pointed out to him the tall brush here and there concealing them. “I’ll bet that they are some tired, lying there in the hot sun and straining themselves to keep the brush upright and motionless!” After a moment of thought he added, “Tsistsaki,

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bring me a couple of firers for this loud-mouth gun.”

“I have them already,” she answered and handed him a fuse. He stuck it into the touch-hole of the cannon and poured some fine powder from his horn in round it. “I will attend to this,” he said to us then. “Now, you, Henri Robarre! You being about as poor a shot as ever cordelled up this river, you fire at the foot of one of those bunches of tall sage, just to start this surprise party. You others then do the best you can.”

He waited until Tsistsaki had interpreted his words to Pitamakan and then told Henri to fire. Henri did so. None of us saw where the ball struck, and I doubt whether he himself knew where he aimed. The loud boom of the gun echoed across the valley and died away; the smoke from it lifted, but none of the enemy made a move; not one of their shelters even quivered.

“Just what I expected! Abbott, let us see what you can do,” said my uncle.

Abbott stood up, head and shoulders above the

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barricade, took quick aim and fired at a bunch of the brush; down it fell as the man behind it let go his hold upon it and with loud yells of warning or command to his companions ran straight away from us. At that all the others sprang from their places of concealment like so many jumping-jacks, and those with guns fired at us before they turned to run. When we fired at them three went down at once, and two more staggered on a little way before they fell. At that our engagés took heart and yelled defiance at the enemy as they hastily began reloading their guns. I heard Abbott calling himself names for having failed to kill the man behind the brush that he had fired into.

The enemy, twenty or more of them, were drawing together as they went leaping through the sagebrush, straight up the valley; and presently they halted and faced about and with yells of hatred and defiance fired several more desultory shots at us. That was the opportunity for which my uncle was waiting. He hastily sighted the cannon at them and lighted the fuse. The old gun went off

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with a tremendous roar, and with wild shrieks of fear the enemy ran on faster than ever, if that were possible — all but two whom the grapeshot had struck.

“Help, here! Powder and a solid shot!” my uncle yelled.

Those, too, Tsistsaki had ready for us. Abbott and I rammed the charges in; Tsistsaki inserted a fresh fuse. We wheeled the gun round into place, and my uncle again sighted it and touched it off. We waited and waited, and at last saw a cloud of dust and bits of sagebrush puff into the air close to the left of the fleeing enemy. As one man they leaped affrightedly to the right and headed for the mouth of a coulee that entered the valley from the west. Before we could load the cannon again they had turned up into the coulee and were gone from our sight.

“Well,” my uncle exclaimed, “I guess that settles our trouble with that outfit!” Almost at the same moment a heated argument arose among our engagés, every one of whom asserted that he

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had killed an enemy. "Here, you, the way for you all to settle your claims is to go out there and show which one of the enemy you each downed!"

Not one of them made answer to that; not one of them wanted to go out there, perhaps to face a wounded and desperate man. Pitamakan stared at them, muttered something about cowardly dog-faces, and leaped over the barricade. Abbott, my uncle, Tsistsaki, and I followed his move, but we had gone out some distance before the engagés began to follow, moving slowly well in our rear.

We, of course, did not proceed without due caution. The very first one of the dead that we approached was one of the two Crows who had tried to entice Pitamakan and me into a peace smoke with them, which would have been our last. We were glad enough that he was one of the dead.

"I killed him," said Pitamakan as we passed on. "I killed him; he dropped when I fired, but I cannot count coup upon him."

"Why not?" Tsistsaki asked.

"Because of that!" he replied, turning and

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pointing to the engagés. They had come to the body of the Crow and three were pretending to have fired the bullet that laid the enemy low. "I cannot prove that I killed him," he added sorrowfully.

Now the three engagés who had been left on guard in the grove came to us, out of breath and excited, and my uncle promptly ordered them back to their places. We made the round of the dead, the engagés taking their weapons and various belongings; then we went back to the barricade for dinner, first, however, watering and picketing the hungry horses. Later on, when the teams were again hitched, the engagés drove about and gathered up the dead and consigned them to the depths of the big river.

That evening as Pitamakan, Abbott, and I were preparing to go down into the grove for our nightly watch the engagés were celebrating our victory of the day. They had all assembled in Henri Robarre's lodge, singing quaint songs, boasting of their bravery and accurate shooting, and calling loudly for

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the women to prepare a little feast, for they were going to dance. The women! They were gathered in another lodge, laughing at their men. Otter Woman, Henri Robarre's wife, who was a wonderful mimic, was making the others ache from laughing as she repeated her man's futile protests and his gait when she had driven him home from the gathering of the men who requested their discharge.

"Those women have a whole lot more sense than their men," Abbott remarked.

The night passed quietly. Late in the following afternoon, just after we three had ended our daily sleep, the women cried out that they could see the smoke from a down-river steamboat, and Tsistsaki ran to the grove to let my uncle know of its coming.

He hurried up to the barricade and eagerly watched the approaching smoke. "We shall have help now; you boys will not have to stand night watch much longer. That old tub is bringing plenty of men!"

The boat soon rounded the bend above and drew in to our landing. Two men leaped ashore,

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and the roustabouts threw their rolls of bedding after them. From the pilot-house Henry Page tossed out to us a weighted sack. "I'm sorry, Wesley, that we could n't get more men for you. There's a letter that explains it all!" he called. "Well, keep up a good heart; your Blackfeet will soon be with you. So long!" Then the surly captain, standing beside him, rang some bells, Page whirled his big wheel, and the boat went on. The two men came up the bank and greeted us. I had been so intent upon our few words with the pilot that I had not noticed who they were.

Now I was glad when I saw the rugged, smooth-shaven faces of the Tennessee Twins, as they were called all up and down the river. The Baxters, Lem and Josh, were independent bachelor trappers who roamed where they willed, despite the hostile war parties of various tribes that were ever trying to get their scalps. They seemed to bear charmed lives. As a rule the American Fur Company had not been friendly toward independent trappers, but those two men were so big-hearted and had

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done us so many favors that we all thought highly of them; and Pierre Chouteau himself had given orders to all the factors up and down the river that they were to be treated with every consideration.

“Well, Wesley, here we are,” said Lem Baxter after we had shaken hands all round.

“You don’t mean that you have come to work for me?” my uncle exclaimed.

“That’s about the size of it,” Josh put in.

“You see, ’t was this way,” Lem went on. “When we heard of the trouble you were in, and Carroll and Steell could n’t engage any men for you, we saw it were our plain duty to come down and lend you a hand.”

“Who said that we were in trouble?”

“Why, that there steamboat captain, Wiggins,” Lem answered. “You see, ’t was this way: Henry Page bawled the captain out fer not allowin’ him to put in here in answer to your hail. So to kind of play even the low-down sneak begins to blow about the battle you are expectin’ to have with the Assiniboins. Yes, sir, makes a regular holler about it as

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soon as his boat ties up in front of the fort. Well, I guess you know them French engagés. The minute they hear about the Assiniboins Carroll and Steell can't hire nary a one of 'em for you."

"Well, now, that Wiggins man is a real friendly kind of chap, is n't he?" my uncle exclaimed. By the tone of his voice I knew that that captain was in for trouble when the two should meet.

"Still, Wesley, you're in luck," Lem went on. "Who but your own brother-in-law, White Wolf, should happen to be in the fort when Page delivered your letter to Steell. As soon as he was told what was up he said to us, 'You tell Far Thunder that we shall all be with him for that battle with the cut-throats! Tell him to look for us to come chargin' down by the Crooked Creek Trail!' Then he lit out for his camp as fast as he could go."

"Ha! Down Sacajawea Creek. They will cross the river at Fort Benton. Down the north side would have been the shorter way," said my uncle.

"We mentioned that to him, and he answered

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that better time could be made on the south-side trail," said Josh.

"And there you be! Don't worry!" cried Lem. "Now, Wesley, is it sartin sure that you plunked that there Slidin' Beaver?"

"His body is somewhere down there in the river!" I replied.

"You bet! Wesley finished him!" Abbott exclaimed.

"Glory be! Look how near that there cut-throat got me!" cried Lem, and pointed to a bullet crease in the side of his neck.

"Hurry! Tell me the news they brought!" Pitamakan demanded of me as we all turned toward the barricade. He fairly danced round me when he learned that his own father had taken word of our need to the Pikuni and that the warriors would come to us as soon as possible by the south-side trail.

Presently Tsistsaki called us to supper. During the meal we told the Twins all that had happened to us since we landed there at the mouth of the

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Musselshell. Then, having learned the details of our day-and-night watch, they declared that they wanted to stand watch in the grove that night and laughed when we said that we thought three men were needed to guard it.

We three were only too glad to let them have their way. However, we relieved the engagés from watch duty in the barricade, dividing the night between us, and they were therefore in good shape the next morning for a day of real work. Beginning that day, they were all ordered to cut and haul logs while the rest of us performed what guard duty had been their share. In consequence the heaps of logs round the site of the fort grew rapidly, and we began to look forward to the day when we should begin work upon the walls. My uncle said that at least one side of the fort must soon be put up, in which to store the trade goods that would surely be landed for us within six weeks.

A day came soon, but not too soon for Pitamakan and me, when the camp required more

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meat. I asked to be allowed to ride Is-spai-u, but my uncle shook his head.

As we were saddling our horses, the men started for the grove and Henri Robarre called out to us: "Eet is halways ze buf' dat you keel! Why not sometames ze helk, ze deer, ze hantelopes?"

"Kyai-yo!" Tsistsaki exclaimed. "He knows that real meat is the best; it is only that he must be continually making objections that he talks that way. Pay no attention to him; kill real meat for us as usual."

"Oh, kill elk or deer along with the buffalo! Kill some badgers if they want them! Anything for peace in camp!" my uncle exclaimed.

It was easy enough to get the buffalo; they were always in the valley within sight of camp. That morning we found a herd within a mile of it, killed five fat animals and had the meat all loaded upon the following wagon by nine o'clock. The teamster then headed for camp, and we went on to kill what our horses could pack of some other kind of meat.

Now, we did not want to ride into the brush-

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filled groves along the river in quest of elk and deer, for as likely as not we should be ambushed by some wandering war party. We therefore turned back through the grove in which the men were at work and thence went on down the big game trail running from the mouth of the Musselshell down the Missouri Valley. Where it entered the first of the narrow bottoms we turned off. We had gone no more than a couple of hundred yards when four bull elk rose out of a patch of junipers on the hill to our right and inquisitively stared at us. I slipped from my horse, took careful aim, and shot one of them.

We tethered our horses close to my kill and were butchering it when we were startled by a loud but distant hail and sprang for our rifles, which were leaning against some brush several steps away. We looked down into the bottom under us and there, just outside the narrow grove that fringed the river, we saw five Indians standing all in a row.

“Ha! Another war party, and no doubt another invitation to a smoke that would be the end of us!” Pitamakan exclaimed indignantly.

CHAPTER VII

LAME WOLF PRAYS TO HIS RAVEN

THAT morning I had not forgotten to sling on my telescope before leaving camp. I got it out, then took a good look at the men, and said to Pitamakan, "They don't appear to be a war party; they are all old men, and some have large packs upon their backs!"

"Ha! It is well-planned deception, but I shall take no chances with them. I am sure that the brush behind them is full of warriors!" Pitamakan replied.

I somehow believed that for once he was mistaken, and when a moment later the five men started toward us, all making the peace sign and singing a strange, quaint, melancholy song, so weird, so strangely affecting, that it almost brought tears to my eyes, Pitamakan himself said, "I was mistaken! They are men of peace! I believe that they are men of the Earth-Houses People."

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We met the strangers at the foot of the slope. They continued their quaint song until we were face to face with them; then their leader, first making the sign that he was one of the Earth-Houses People, as the Blackfeet call the Mandans, embraced me and Pitamakan, and so did the others, each in his turn.

“We are glad to meet you this good day,” said the leader to me in the sign language. “We have often heard about you. We know that you are the Fox, the young relative of Far Thunder. We know that your companion is the young Pikuni, Running Eagle. We have come a long way to see and talk with Far Thunder. His camp is close by, there where the two rivers meet, is it not? Yes? We are glad!”

“Our hearts are the same as yours,” I replied. “We are glad to meet you this good day. Just up there we have killed an elk. Wait for us until we have butchered it and loaded the meat upon our horses; then we will go with you to Far Thunder.”

The old leader signed his assent to the proposal,

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and Pitamakan and I hurried back up the hill to our work. We were not long at it, taking only the best of the meat; then I told Pitamakan to hurry on ahead and notify my uncle of the Mandans' coming, so that he could meet them with fitting ceremony at the barricade. I then rejoined the visitors, leading my horse and walking with them, and in the course of an hour we were greeted by my uncle at the passageway into camp. One after another they embraced him; then he signed to them that his lodge was their lodge, and he led them into it, where Tsistsaki greeted them with smiles and turned to the big kettles of meat and coffee that she was cooking for them and broke out a fresh box of hard bread.

With due formality my uncle got out his huge pipe, filled it with a mixture of l'herbe and tobacco and passed it to the old leader of the party to light. The old man capped it with a coal from the fire, muttered a short prayer, and, blowing great mouthfuls of smoke to the four points of the compass, started it upon its journey round the circle. The

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Mandans made no mention of the object of the visit to us, but said that, having heard from the men of the first down-river fire boat that my uncle was building a fort on the great war trail where it crossed Big River, they had thought that a visit of peace should be paid to him. In turn, my uncle asked how the Mandans were faring and told of our troubles with the Crows and Assiniboins. The news of the passing of Sliding Beaver was good news to them; they greeted it with loud clapping of hands and with broad smiles. "Far Thunder," their leader signed, "you must surely have strong medicine. The gods have been very good to you to give you the power to wipe out that terrible, bad man, worst of all the men of the cut-throat tribe. Far Thunder, for what you have done the Earth-Houses People owe you much!"

"I wish that they were all here, all your warriors, for I am expecting to have a big fight with the cut-throats!" my uncle signed.

"We have sent for the warriors of my people to hurry down here and help us, but fear that they will

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not arrive before the cut-throats appear," Pita-makan put in.

After some inquiries about just what we had done toward getting the help of the Pikuni, the old leader turned to my uncle. "Far Thunder," he signed, "you see us, five old men and almost useless; our weapons, five old north stone sparkers [Hudson's Bay Company flintlock guns] and four bows. But such as we are, Far Thunder, we are yours in this fight with the cut-throats, if you want us!"

"You are very generous. We will talk about that later. Just now you are to eat. I see that the food is ready for you," my uncle replied; and Tsistsaki passed to them plates piled with boiled meat, hard bread and dried-apple sauce, and huge bowls of sweetened coffee.

The men now came up from the grove for their dinner. In the afternoon our guests rested, and it was not until evening that we learned the real object of their visit to us. "Far Thunder," the old leader then signed, when we were all gathered in our

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lodge, "no doubt you wonder why we five old men have come the long way through dangerous country to enter your lodge. It is because we are old and are soon to die that we chose to take the place of young and useful men on a mission to you from our people, to bring you gifts and to ask a gift from you."

"Ha! Now I know what is coming; they are after Is-spai-u!" Pitamakan whispered.

"Far Thunder," the old man continued, "no doubt you know that the Spotted-Horses People [the Cheyennes] visit us every summer with their robes and furs and tanned leathers to buy some of the corn that we raise and the pots of clay that we make. Also they come to race their fastest horses against our fastest horses. Know, chief, that for the last five summers they have won every race they made with us, and have gone their way with great winnings, laughing at us and saying, 'Poor Earth-Houses People! Your horses are of little account; even the best of them are only travois horses for our women!' Thus we are made poor and greatly

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shamed. Recently we counseled together about this. ‘We do not,’ said one of the chiefs, ‘much need the things that the Spotted-Horses People bring here. Let us send them word that they need not come again to trade with us; thus will we be saved from again losing all that we have in racing our horses against theirs and being told that our best animals are of no account.’

“We all agreed that this plan should be followed. Messengers were selected to take our decision to the Spotted-Horses People. And then — but wait, Far Thunder — ”

The old man turned and spoke to his companions. They began to unwrap the bundles that they had carried and soon displayed to our admiring eyes a cream-white cow buffalo robe beautifully embroidered with porcupine quillwork of gorgeous colors upon its flesh side; a war suit of fine buckskin, quill embroidered and hung with white weasel skins; a fine shield fringed with eagle tail feathers; and a handsomely carved red stone pipe with feather and fur ornaments on its long stem. One

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by one the old leader took them as they were opened to view and impressively laid them upon the end of my uncle's couch. Then, straightening up in his seat, he continued:

“Those, Far Thunder, are gifts to you from your friends, the Earth-Houses People!

“The messengers were about to start to the camp of the Spotted-Horses People,” he said, resuming his story. “Then the first fire boat of the summer came back down the river, and we learned from its men that you and yours were coming down to the mouth of this little river, to this great war-trail crossing of Big River, where you were to build a fort, and that you had with you your fast, black buffalo-runner. Again we counseled together. This is what we said: ‘Far Thunder is a man of generous heart. We will go to him with our trouble; we will ask him to give the one thing that will enable us to wipe out the shame that the Spotted-Horses People have put upon us.’ Far Thunder, pity us! Give us your black buffalo-runner!”

The eyes of all five of the old men were now upon

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my uncle, eyes full of wistful anxiety, and he hesitated not a moment to give his reply to their request, the one reply that he could make.

“My friends,” he signed, “I must tell you about my black horse. A dying man gave him to me, the man who seized him in the far south country. With his last breath that man — you knew him, One Horn — asked me to promise that I would always keep the horse. I promised. I called upon the sun to witness that I would keep my promise!”

The old men slumped down in their seats in utter dejection, and oh, how sorry we were for them! Their long and dangerous journey, their gifts of their most valued possessions, were all for nothing!

Finally, the old leader spoke a few words to the others; one by one they answered, and several of them spoke at some length and with increasing animation. We wondered what they were saying, in that strange, soft-sounding language. At last the old leader turned again to my uncle.

“Far Thunder!” he signed, “when you told us

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of your promise to the dying man, and that it was a sun promise you gave him, not to be broken — when you told us that — our hearts died. But now, chief, our hearts rise up. Failing one thing, we gain another. We now see that the gods themselves sent us to you, that in our old age we should have one last fight with the cut-throats. Chief, we will remain with you and help you fight them with all the strength that we have left in our poor old arms. If we die, how much better to die fighting than in sickness and pain in our lodges!”

“I am glad that you will stay with us and help fight the cut-throats. These valuable things that you have laid here, you will take them back,” my uncle replied.

“No! We give, but do not take back!”

It was all very affecting. There was a lump in my throat as I looked at those old men, simple-minded, kind-hearted, still eager in their old, old age to face once more their bitter enemies and, if need be, to die. Tsistsaki threw her shawl over her head and

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cried a little in sympathy with them. They presently broke out in a cheerful song of war.

Pitamakan and I took up our rifles and went out to our guard duty. "Those ancient ones, what real men they are!" he said to me.

The night passed quietly. In the morning when the Tennessee Twins came from guard duty in the grove and learned about our evening talk with the old men, they shook hands with them one by one. "You are the strong hearts! We shall be glad to fight alongside with you," Josh signed to them.

Cramped as we were for space within the barricade, Tsistsaki insisted that the old men should have a lodge of their own. The women set up one of the lodges of the engagés, and all contributed to its furnishings of robes and blankets and to its little pile of firewood beside the door; then the widow of poor Louis volunteered to cook their meals. Thus were the ancient ones made perfectly comfortable. At noon of that day, when the men came in for their dinner, our guests went to my uncle and told him that they wanted to help him

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not only in the coming fight with the cut-throats, but in other ways as well. Old though they were, their eyesight was still good; therefore they would do all the daytime guard duty, three of them in the grove and two in camp. We were glad enough to accept their offer, for, as the engagés were now entirely relieved from all share in our constant watch for approaching enemies, the work on the fort progressed rapidly.

The leader of the old men, Lame Wolf, was a medicine man and had with him his complete medicine outfit, the main symbol of which was a stuffed raven, to the legs of which were attached bits of human scalp-locks of varying lengths. To Pitamakan, who became a great favorite with him, the old man said that the raven was his dream, his sacred vision, and very powerful. It had by its great power brought him safe through many a battle with the enemy and had four times in his dreams warned him of the approach of enemies, so that he and his warriors had been able to surprise them and count many coups upon them. Every

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evening now he prayed the raven to give him a revealing vision of the cut-throats and any other enemies who might be approaching us, and his companions joined him in singing the songs to his medicine.

“Far Thunder, my man,” said Tsistsaki, the first evening that we heard the old men praying and singing, “I feel that the gods are with us in this matter of our fort-building upon this hostile war trail. As fast as our troubles have come we have conquered them, and now come these five old men, whose leader is favored of the gods, to help us. I have great faith in his raven medicine.”

“All right. You put your faith in that raven skin. I put mine in our watchfulness and in our rifles,” my uncle laughed.

“Ah, well,” she answered, “the day will come when your eyes will be opened to these sacred things.”

During the next few days three different steamboats passed up the river en route to Fort Benton, and when the first of them came down it answered

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our hail and put in to shore. The captain had intended to put in, anyhow, for he had a letter to us from Carroll and Steell. My uncle handed him a letter for the Fort Union traders, asking them to tell the Mandans that their five old men were staying with us to help fight the Assiniboins, and that they were unable to get Far Thunder's fast runner because of his vow to the sun that he would never part with it. He had prepared the letter at the request of Lame Wolf, and the old man heaved a sigh of satisfaction when he saw it pass into the captain's hands.

Our letter apprised us that the Pikuni, the whole tribe, warriors and all, had forded the river at Fort Benton, on their way to us, only four days before. That news made us low-hearted, for, if the warriors continued on with the tribe at the slow rate it was obliged to travel, we feared that they would never arrive in time to help us in the big fight that every rising sun brought nearer to us.

My uncle declared that, short of logs as we still were, a beginning must be made at once upon the

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walls of the fort; and after dinner Pitamakan, Abbott, and I went out to assist him in laying the first four logs of what was to be the southwest corner building of the fort, the one that was to be my uncle's quarters, and Pitamakan's and mine as well. We rolled the two bottom logs into place and made them level by putting flat stones under the ends; and then Abbott, with quick and skillful axe, saddled the ends; that is, cut deep notches in them. We then rolled on them two end logs and cut notches in the ends to match the saddles in the others. The first fitted snugly down into place; the second did not fit well and was notched deeper at one end; and then, when it fitted into place and we rested, Tsistsaki, who had come to watch, raised her hands to the sky and cried out: "O sun! this home that we are starting to build, let it be a home of peace and plenty; a home of happy days and nights. Have pity upon us all, O sun. Give us, we pray you, long life upon these, your rich and beautiful plains!"

Our team horses, working all day and corralled

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in the barricade the greater part of the night, were rapidly losing their flesh and spirits and no longer minded the flick of the whip. It was plain enough, said my uncle at our evening meal, that they must be put upon good feed at night, or else we must soon stop work. He looked at Pitamakan and me.

“Well, say it!” I cried. “What do you want us to do about it?”

“Night-herd them. Night-herd the whole outfit, saddle-horses and all, up west on the high plains where the feed is good. Leave here after dark so that any wandering war party hanging about will not know just what way you are going or be able to follow you.”

“Oh, my man!” Tsistsaki exclaimed, “I do not like them to do that. Think! Just they two against all the travelers upon this great war trail!”

“Many are the hunters of the fox; he eludes them all,” said Pitamakan.

“We shall strike out with the outfit as soon as it is dark,” I said to my uncle, and that settled the matter.

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Of course I rode Is-spai-u when we started out, driving the loose stock ahead of us. We headed southwest — almost south up along the gentle slope, then, when well out from the valley, northwest — and finally brought the animals to a stand at the head of the breaks of the Missouri, about two miles due west from camp. We then hobbled all but two, Is-spai-u and Pitamakan's buffalo horse, which we picketed with long ropes. By turns we watched our little band during the short night and at sunrise drove them back to the barricade.

"Boys," Tsistsaki said to us after we had finished breakfast, "I have something to say to you before you sleep."

"Say it! We are all but asleep now," Pitamakan answered from his couch.

"It is this: you must not take your horses to-night to feed where you had them last night; every night you must drive them to a different place."

"As if we did n't know enough to do that! We decided upon to-night's grazing-ground when we

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were coming in this morning!" Pitamakan exclaimed.

"Wise almost-mother. What good care you have for us!" I told her.

And what a loving, cheerful smile she gave me! Ah, that was a woman, let me tell you!

There was too much going on in our lodge for us to sleep well; so we took a robe and a blanket apiece and sneaked quietly into the lodge of the old Mandans, who were sleeping after their night watch in the barricade.

At about four o'clock the old men aroused us, and Lame Wolf signed that they were going to bathe; would we go with them? We did, and were refreshed. Then, after we were back in the lodge and dressed, old Lame Wolf painted our faces with red-earth paint, the sacred color, and prayed for us. We could not, of course, understand what he said, for he did not accompany the prayer with signs, but Pitamakan said that made no difference; it was, of course, good and powerful prayer.

At supper that evening we talked about the big

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fight we were expecting to have with the Assiniboin, and wondered whether our people would arrive in time for it. It was possible that the warriors were coming on ahead, and if they were they might come riding down at any moment.

“If we could only figure the probable time of the coming of the cut-throats as well as we can that of our people!” my uncle exclaimed.

“Wal, now, Wesley, you’re goin’ to know what I’ve had in my think-box for some time; I can’t keep it shut any longer,” Abbott said. “We’ve heard that the Assiniboin camp is away off on the Assiniboin River. But you can hear a lot that ain’t so. Maybe it is nowhere like that far off. Ag’in, that there war party that we routed don’t have to go clear home to get help to try to wipe us out; the Assiniboin and the Yanktonnais are about the same breed of pups — both Sioux stock. All those pals of Slidin’ Beaver’s have to do is to let the Yanktonnais know that we have that there Is-pai-u horse with us, and they’ll come a-runnin’ after him, even if they don’t care shucks about

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avengin' the death of Slidin' Beaver. I'll lay four bits that the Yanktonnais camp is a long way this side of the Assiniboin River. Let's look the thing in the face. It's possible, fellers, that the ball may open this very night!"

"Let her come; we're here first!" Josh exclaimed.

"You bet you! I'm jest a-achin' for a scrap with those cut-throats!" his twin chimed in.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MANDANS SING THEIR VICTORY SONG

MY uncle was not anxious for a fight with our enemies. I had never seen him so worried. When Abbott and the Twins had gone out of the lodge, he said to us: "I was too eager for this undertaking. Carroll and Steell warned me of its dangers, but I would n't listen. I should n't have come down here until I had engaged thirty or forty men to build the fort. We may all be wiped out! What would become of you, my woman, and of you, Thomas, if I were to go under now with the load of debt that I have incurred in St. Louis? And after all my years of endeavor, what a bad name would be mine!"

"Now, Far Thunder, just you quit that worrying, for everything is going to come out right for us. I know it! I just know that the gods are with us," said my almost-mother.

I could think of nothing to say. As I nodded to

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Pitamakan and we went out to drive the horses to their night-grazing I wished that I were not so tongue-tied.

“What was he saying?” Pitamakan asked me. I told him, and back to the lodge he went, thrust his head inside the doorway and said: “Far Thunder, you have overlooked our main helper. That loud-mouthed gun of ours can defeat the cut-throats and all their brother tribes, too.”

“Maybe so, if they give us time to point and fire it at them,” my uncle answered; and my almost-brother came back to me lightly humming his favorite war song.

A cloudy sky made the night very dark. We mounted and drove the loose stock straight west out of the valley, then went southwest for a couple of miles and hobbled them. We picketed Is-spai-u and my runner, which Pitamakan had saddled that evening. We then drew back outside of the sweep of the long ropes, and were about to spread our buffalo robe and lie down when we heard the whir of a rattlesnake close in front of us and another at

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our right. "Ha! This is worse than facing a war party!" Pitamakan exclaimed. At the sound of his voice the snakes rattled again, and a third somewhere close on our left answered them. We were afraid to move lest we step upon one of the rattlers and get a jab in our moccasined feet from its poisonous fangs.

"We must get back upon our horses and move on," I said.

"Well, you have matches. Begin lighting them and we will do that," said Pitamakan.

I felt in the pocket of my buckskin shirt where I usually carried a few matches wrapped in paper and waterproof bladder skin. The pocket was empty. I felt in my ball pouch and in my trousers pockets, although I knew it was useless to do so, and Pitamakan groaned, "You have lost them?"

"Yes!"

"We just have to pray the gods to guide us," he said.

As we turned, it seemed to our straining ears that snakes rattled upon all sides of us.

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“Go slowly!” Pitamakan cautioned. “Stamp the ground hard, and keep swinging your rifle out in front of you.”

Thus step by step we drew away from the rattlers, fearing all the time that we should encounter one that would strike before warning us of its presence.

At last we came to Is-spai-u, a dim shadow in the darkness, and took up his rope and led him on to the other picketed animal. Our scare was still with us as we went among the horses and removed their hobbles, but, getting into our saddles, we drove the stock on for fully a mile. Before hobbling them again, we circled round and round and made sure that we were not occupying another patch of snake-infested plain.

“Well, we survived that danger! I believe it is a sign that we are not to be bitten by the two-legged snakes that will soon attack us,” said Pitamakan after we had spread our robe and were resting comfortably upon it.

Since I was no believer in signs, I did not say anything on the subject.

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"You sleep; I'll take the first watch," I told him.

The heavy clouds soon disappeared, the moon came up, and I could see our surroundings very well. The horses were ripping off great mouthfuls of rich bunch-grass and lustily chewing it. Their deep, satisfied breathing gave me a glad feeling. All round us wolves were howling and coyotes were yelping in high falsetto voices. How different were these two branches of the great wolf family, I thought. The wolves were of a serious, dignified nature; they seemed never to howl except to communicate with one another. The coyotes gathered in bands and wandered aimlessly from ridge to ridge, stopping frequently and raising their sharp, pointed noses to the sky and yelping.

My thoughts were not long upon the wolves. I remembered how worried my uncle was when I had left our lodge; how serious was the expression of Abbott's eyes when he predicted that the attack by the cut-throats was about to take place.

I stared at the faint, moonlit outlines of the Moccasin Mountains, away off to the southwest. Some-

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where along the trail at the foot of them the Pikuni were doubtless camping that night. Unwittingly I cried out in Blackfoot, "Oh, hurry! Hurry to us, you men of the Pikuni, else you will come too late!"

"What? What did you say? Do you see enemies?" Pitamakan whispered as he sat up suddenly at my side.

"Oh, nothing. I was just calling to our people to hurry to us. I am so afraid that they may not get here in time to help us," I answered.

"You forget that the loud-mouthed gun is of great strength. It can shoot one of those big, hard metal balls a long way. And at short range just think what it can do with a sackful of our small, soft balls!"

"Yes, true enough. But think how long it takes to move and sight and fire it! Loud-mouth is now pointing out the south side of the barricade. Should the cut-throats suddenly attack us from the north side, we should never even get a chance to fire it!"

"Ha! What a crazy head I am, never to have thought about that! Loud-mouths are of sure help

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only when there are two of them, each in a little outsetting house of its own, at opposite corners of a fort. Almost-brother, Far Thunder should send us at once to meet our people and get the warriors here as fast as their horses can carry them."

"You have spoken my thought, too. We will tell him about it in the morning," I answered.

"Yes, we will do that. Let us drive the horses in very early."

After a time we detected off to the west a dark, wide, cloud-like mass slowly moving over the plain. It was composed of buffaloes, of course, a large herd of them grazing straight toward the horses. It would not do to let them come on, for in the stampede that was sure to occur the frightened horses might go with them. We went slowly and silently toward them and suddenly sprang forward, waving our blankets. They paused, stared at us for a moment, then turned and went thundering off to the south. There must have been a thousand of them, judging by the noise that they made.

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We returned to our watching-place, and I lay down and soon was asleep. When I awoke, I knew by the position of the Seven Persons, as the Black-feet name the constellation of Ursa Major, that day was not far off. I said that I would take the remainder of the watch, but Pitamakan had no more than lain down when the faint, far-off boom of a gun brought us both to our feet.

“Where was it?” he asked.

“Off to the north,” I answered.

Again we heard shots, four or five of them, faint and low, like distant thunder, then one that was sharper, like the crack of a whip.

“That last one was from Far Thunder’s rifle!” Pitamakan exclaimed.

“Yes. Great Rider’s words have come true: the cut-throats are attacking camp!”

We ran to the horses and fumbled at their hobbles; then we coiled the ropes of our picketed saddle-animals, mounted and drove the little band on the run for camp.

“There is no more shooting!” I exclaimed.

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"Not another shot! It looks bad to me! Maybe our people are wiped out!" Pitamakan answered.

He expressed my own fear. We forced the horses to their utmost speed. It was all of three miles to the mouth of the Musselshell, and never were there such long miles. Day was breaking as we neared the valley rim overlooking camp. A hundred yards or so away from the edge we slowed up, dropped the loose stock, and with ready rifles rode slowly on.

When at last we looked down upon the camp, I could have yelled my relief. I saw smoke peacefully rising from the lodges and a couple of women going from the barricade to the river for water. Then we heard the old Mandans singing a song that we had not heard before, a triumphant song in quick, strongly marked time.

"All is well!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, something pleasant has happened. What can it be?"

With light hearts we turned back to our loose stock, drove them down near the barricade, and

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let them go to graze as they would until it was time for the work of the day to begin. I was in the lead as we drove into the barricade to unsaddle, and as I passed through the entrance Is-spai-u gave a sudden turning leap that nearly unseated me, and then stood staring and snorting at a huge grizzly that lay at one side of the path. My uncle and Abbott came out of our lodge and grinned broadly at us.

“Well, boys,” said my uncle, “that’s a real bear, is n’t it!”

“We’ve had some excitement here, and ’t is n’t all over yet. Listen to the old boys in there, sing-in’!” said Abbott.

“We heard the shots and thought that you were all wiped out, they ceased so suddenly,” I said.

We unsaddled and followed the men into the lodge, where Tsistsaki, who was preparing breakfast, gave us cheerful greeting.

“This is what happened, as near as we can make out from the old Mandans and from what we saw of it,” my uncle said to us.

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“It was about an hour back when old Lame Wolf, who was on guard at the north side of the barricade, saw a big bear close in front of him. It was a chance to count a coup that he could n’t resist. Taking good aim with his old fuke, he fired and let out a yell. But his yell was n’t so loud as the roar of the bear when the bullet spatted into his side. We all waked and rushed outside, but the other old watchers were ahead of us. They ran to Lame Wolf, and the first of them fired at the bear, which was growling and biting at its wound. At that, the bear came with a rush over the logs right in among them. He was badly hurt, but would surely have mauled and killed some of them had it not been for the powder smoke from their fukes, which blinded him and made him cough. The old men were running away in all directions, but he could n’t see them. He sat up to get his bearings, and just then the smoke lifted; and there he was, a mountain of a bear close in front of me. I took quick sight at him and broke his neck. It all happened so quickly, and the old men were so intent

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upon getting out of reach of the bear, that they never knew that I gave him the finishing shot. One of them, looking back, shouted something to the others, and all turned and ran to the bear; and old Lane Wolf tapped him on the head with the barrel of his fuke and counted coup on him. He claimed it, no doubt, because he had fired the first shot into his carcass."

"And what did the engagés do?" Pitamakan asked.

"What did they do! You should have heard Henri Robarre praying to be saved. The others joined in and ran about among the lodges, carrying their guns as though they were so many sticks!" Abbott exclaimed.

"They did better than that in our Sliding Beaver fight," I said.

"So they did, and they probably will be of some help when another real fight takes place. I have just given them my opinion of their actions in a way they will not soon forget," said my uncle.

We washed and had breakfast while the old men

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still sang their quaint song of victory. Afterwards, when we went out, old Lane Wolf was cutting the claws from his coup. He did not want the hide, nor did we; the hair was the old, sunburned, and ragged winter coat. So the engagés hitched an unwilling team to the carcass, dragged it to the edge of the river-bank, and rolled it into the water. They all then went down into the grove, and the Tennessee Twins came up from it for their breakfast and their sleep. The night had been quiet down there. One of them had come to learn the cause of the firing in camp and had gone back, my uncle said, almost bursting with anger at the cowardly and disgraceful exhibition the engagés had made of themselves.

That day Pitamakan and I had Tsistsaki waken us shortly before noon, and when my uncle and Abbott returned to the lodge for dinner we proposed that we be allowed to go to meet the Pikuni and bring them on — a part of the warriors, at any rate — with all haste.

Abbott said he thought we should do that, but my uncle decided against it. If we did not night-

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herd the horses, he said, they could not work. He thought that the Pikuni would arrive in time to fight the cut-throats.

“I think you are making a mistake, Wesley; you had better let them go for help; we’ll probably be needing it sooner than you think,” Abbott told him.

If my uncle had a fault, it was that he relied too much upon his own judgment. In reply to Abbott he merely said: “No, we’ll take a chance on another day of good, hard work. Then if the Pikuni don’t show up, the boys can go look for them.”

Pitamakan and I had not much enthusiasm for the afternoon work, and when, about two o’clock, the old Mandans came to us and told us that they were going to scatter out upon discovery we so longed to go with them that we fairly hated our log-laying. Tsistsaki stood by, watching us with pitying eyes, but my uncle, never noticing our dissatisfaction, whistled as he skillfully swung his axe.

“Thomas, boy,” he said, “this log-laying reminds me of a church-raising that I attended long

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ago, 'way back in the States. It was a little log meeting-house that they were putting up, and your father and I lent a hand with the chinking. Your grandfather was the preacher of that sparse congregation, and a mighty man with the axe as well as with the Word."

"How did you happen to leave the States?" I asked.

"Your father and I were different," he answered. "Somehow, the farm life there did not appeal to us. We made a break for the West. Your father, poor fellow, never got beyond St. Louis. If he had only come on with me! How he would have enjoyed this life!"

"You know well why he did n't come," I said.

"Of course. It was your mother, dear soul! He promised her that he would never engage in the Far West trade, and he was a man of his word."

During the afternoon we brought the walls of the building up to a height of five logs, — about the height of my shoulder, — and as we knocked off work my uncle said, "Two more rounds of logs,

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well chinked, and we'll have a pretty respectable defense against the enemy."

Returning to the barricade, we found that three of the Mandans had come back, unnoticed by us. They reported that they had been some distance up the Musselshell Valley and had seen no signs of enemies. Later, while we were eating supper, old Lamé Wolf and his companion came in, and the moment they passed through the doorway I knew from the expression of their faces that they had something important to tell. They hurriedly took seats upon my couch, and Lamé Wolf signed to my uncle: "Far Thunder, chief, enemies are here! We climbed to the top of the point between the two valleys, the point there across from the grove, and upon the very top of it found where enemies have been lying, looking down and watching us!"

"Probably a small war party, too small to attack us and gone upon their way," my uncle answered.

"Not so! Decidedly not so!" the old man signed

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on. "They have watched there for several days — at least five men. They sneaked away when they saw us coming. Why did they do that when they could easily have surprised and killed us? Because they are the scouts of a multitude coming to attack us, and are to tell the chiefs just how to do it."

"I believe that the old man is right!" Abbott exclaimed.

"He may be, but I doubt it," said my uncle. "Up there is the lookout place for all the war parties passing along this great trail. I doubt not that one was recently there. I can't believe, however, that five or six enemies withdrew from the point upon the approach of these two old men. Had they been there at that time, they would certainly never have overlooked such an easy opportunity to count two coups."

"Well, whether you believe they are right or not, I advise you to keep a good guard round the barricade to-night and to keep the horses in, too," said Abbott.

"The horses must go out to feed as usual. In

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any event, they will be safe off there upon the dark plain.”

Abbott threw out his hands with a gesture of despair. “All right, you for it! I’ve said my say.”

Old Lane Wolf, of course, understood nothing of what was being said. He waited until the talk apparently was ended, got my uncle’s attention once more and signed, “What shall you do?”

“We shall some of us stand watch with you to-night,” my uncle answered.

“That is good. Be sure that the loud-mouthed gun is well loaded and ready to fire,” the old man concluded, and the two went out to their evening meal.

When supper was over, my uncle called the engagés together, told them the old Mandans believed that the enemy might attack us during the night, and ordered them to look well to their guns. He then called the names of those he wanted for extra guard duty, and of those who were to help him with the cannon. But to this plan Tsistsaki made strong objection.

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“No,” she said; “let each man use his rifle. We will help with the gun.” And my uncle promised that she should have her way.

As Pitamakan and I were preparing to take the horses out, I had a last word with my uncle.

“If you are attacked to-night, what shall we do?” I asked.

“I would not be sending you out if I believed that was to happen. However, if it does happen, you must do the best you can; your own judgment must guide you,” he answered.

CHAPTER IX

BIG LAKE CALLS A COUNCIL

IT was quite dark when Pitamakan and I drove the horses out from the barricade for their night-grazing. We flicked them into a lope up the rise to the plain, but when we were nearly to the top they suddenly shied at something ahead and dashed sharply off to the left. I was riding Is-spai-u as usual, and he was so frightened that it was all I could do to keep him from running ahead of the loose stock. Pitamakan and I went some distance before we managed to head the horses up the slope; and as soon as we were well out on the plain I asked Pitamakan what he thought had frightened our animals.

“I will tell you my real belief,” he answered. “It was the enemy, maybe a number of them, lying there to see in what direction we would drive the horses, so that they could trail on and take them from us.”

Big Lake Calls a Council

“It may have been a bear.”

“If a bear had been there, we should have seen him; there is starlight enough for that. The low, sweet sage growth along the slope could not have hidden a bear from us, but it is high enough to conceal men lying flat in it. Almost-brother, I believe with old Lame Wolf that trouble is about to break upon us!”

“Well, they shall not get these horses,” I declared.

When, at last, we hobbled the loose animals and picketed Is-spai-u and Pitamakan’s runner we felt sure that no enemy could find us. But there was to be no sleep for us that night; we settled down to listen for the far-off boom of the cannon, which would tell us that the cut-throats had attacked our camp.

About midnight we nearly started for the west and southwest and the Pikuni, but we decided to wait a little longer and listen for the boom of the cannon. We watched the Seven Persons swinging round in the northern sky, and at last they warned

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us that day was not far off. The attack upon camp had not opened; so we decided to urge my uncle to allow us to go at once in search of the Pikuni. We unhobbled the loose stock and drove them in with a rush. There was only a faint lightening of the eastern horizon when we arrived at the barricade, and Abbott, standing on watch at the passageway, let down the bars for us.

“You are in plenty early this mornin’,” he said as we drove past him.

“We have reason for it. We want to persuade my uncle to let us start right now after the Pikuni,” I answered.

“You said it! That is just what he should have you do!” he exclaimed.

As we got down from our horses we saw dimly here and there the other watchers approaching to learn whether we had anything to tell of the night. Then in the direction of the grove we all heard the patter of feet striking harshly upon the stony ground.

“It’s the Twins!” Abbott exclaimed.

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“Behind them the cut-throats!” said Pitamakan, and at the same time our ears caught the faint thudding of many moccasined feet.

Then the Twins loomed up hugely in the dusk. They dashed in through the passageway, and Josh gasped out, “They’re right at our tails! Run that cannon out!”

The cannon was in the center of the barricade, loaded with trade balls, fused, and covered with a piece of canvas to protect it from the weather. As Abbott, the Twins, and I ran to it, Pitamakan hurried on to our lodge to rouse my uncle; and the engagés, who had been on watch with the Mandans, quietly slipped round awakening the inmates of the other lodges. I flipped the cover on the cannon, and, just as we got it into the passageway, the fight opened with shots and yells on the west side of the barricade. The thought flashed into my mind that Pitamakan had been right. It had been some of the enemy, lying concealed upon the slope, that our horses had shied from when we were driving them out to graze.

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“Never mind the racket back there; our job is right here! Now! Swing her round!” Abbott shouted to us, and he had to shout in order to make himself heard.

We swung the gun round. I kept hold on the tailpiece while Abbott sighted and called, “To the right a little! Left a trifle! There!”

As he lighted the fuse I sprang out of the way of the recoil and for the first time looked ahead. Out of the dusk of the morning, less than a hundred yards away, a horde of warriors were coming toward us swiftly yet with cautious, catlike steps. There was something terribly sinister in their approach, far more so than if they had come with the usual war songs and shouts of an Indian attack. *Boom!* went the cannon. The flash of it blinded us; the smoke drifted into our faces. Lem, who was carrying our rifles in his arms, shouted to us to take them.

“No! Lay ’em down! Help load! Where’s the powder for this gun?” Abbott yelled.

“Right here!” cried my uncle as he and Tsist-

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saki and a couple of other women joined us. "Use your rifles!"

We snatched them from Lem, and, lo! as the smoke drifted away we could see no one to shoot at, nor could we hear anything but the hollow murmur of the river, as if it were mocking us.

"By gum! They've just flew away!" Lem exclaimed.

"Not they!" said my uncle, proceeding to thrust a charge powder into the cannon and ram it home. "Just step over to the river-bank and look down, and you'll see them."

"Ha! So that's their scheme, is it? Goin' to shut us off from water! I might have knowed it! What beats me is, why did n't they come on? If they had, 't would have been all over with us in about two minutes!" said Lem.

"What say they?" Pitamakan asked me, and I told him.

The Mandans and the engagés now came to us from the other side of the stockade, with the women and children trailing after them.

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"The cut-throats ran down over the river-bank," old Lame Wolf signed to my uncle.

"Sare, M'sieu' Reynard," Henri Robarre said to him, "hon our side ze cut-throats were but few. Zey holler much, zey fire deir guns no at us. Zey shoot hup at ze stars, an' zen run hide behin' ze bank of ze riv'. M'sieu', what hit means, dat strange conducts?"

"I don't understand it myself, except that when the Twins discovered them their plan of attack went all wrong," my uncle answered in a puzzled voice.

"I know all about it," Pitamakan said in the sign language so that the Mandans should understand.

"Well, let us hear," said my uncle.

"This is it," he went on. "The cut-throats want our scalps, but they want also Is-spai-u. A few of them laid in wait for my almost-brother and me, hoping to seize the runner when we drove the herd out last night; but they failed. The chiefs then planned to wait until we should bring the horses

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back into the barricade and kill us in a surprise attack as we all stood fighting their few men on the west side. Thus they would take no chances of shooting the black runner. They would have wiped us out, had not the Twins discovered them down there in the timber. Now they plan to make us go mad from want of water and then wipe us out."

"You women, how much water have you?" Tsistsaki asked.

One by one they answered; there was not a bucketful in any lodge!

"Far Thunder, it is now time for my almost-brother and me to go after our people," Pitamakan said to my uncle impressively.

"It is! Go — as fast as you can!" he replied.

"I ride Is-spai-u," I said.

"You do not! He is our shield, it seems. You ride your own runner!"

We had saddled up and were ready to start within five minutes. Day had come. To the west and east there was not a single body of the enemy. Abbott could hardly believe his eyes.

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Tsistsaki, ever thoughtful of us, had tied little sacks of food to our saddles, and now we mounted our runners. Nowhere along the bank of the river was there the least sign of the enemy, but we were certain that many a pair of eyes was watching the barricade from clumps of rye grass and sweet sage.

“You’ll better lie low on yer horses an’ go out flyin’; they’ll prob’ly shoot at you,” Abbott warned us.

My uncle came and grasped my hand. “It is a terrible risk you are taking. I wish I could take it for you, but my place seems to be here. I’ve got you all in a bad fix, my boy, but I hope you and Pitamakan will pull us out of it.” His voice was unsteady.

“We’ll do our best,” I answered.

“Go, I am praying for you both!” Tsistsaki called out to us.

We took a running start, hanging low upon the right side of our animals, and went out through the passageway with a rush. We turned sharply to the right, and in no time had the barricade between us

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and the river. Not a shot was fired at us. We rode straight up the valley for fully a mile before we turned out on the plain. There we halted for a last look at camp. How peaceful it seemed! But how terrible was the situation! There were at least two hundred enemies between our few people and water.

As we rode on we kept looking for the trail of dust raised by thousands of dragging, sharp-pointed lodge poles and travois and horses' hoofs, that would mark the advance of the Pikuni. We were not long in reaching Crooked Creek, and there at the rim of the valley we parted, Pitamakan to go due west toward the buttes of It-Crushed-Them Creek, I to follow up the stream. At the head of it, close to the foot of the mountains, he said, I should find the deep, well-worn trail of the Pikuni, which ran straight east past the foot of Black Butte to the Musselshell. If I should fail to meet the Pikuni along Crooked Creek I was to go west along the trail until I found them or the place where they had turned northeast in the direction of the buttes toward which he was heading.

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It was about four o'clock in the afternoon when I struck the big east-and-west trail at the head of the creek, not more than a mile from the foot of the Moccasin Mountains. My horse went on more easily in one of the broad, smooth tracks, and I was more expectant. The Pikuni could not be far from me now, I thought.

Toward sundown I topped a long, wide, sloping ridge and looked back along the way I had come—more than forty miles. My horse was showing the strain of the long, hot ride. My throat was burning hot from want of water; my lips were cracking.

A mile or two ahead were low, pine-capped hills, and between two of them I saw a patch of the bright green foliage of cottonwoods, a sure sign of water. It was growing dusk when I arrived at the place. I slid from my horse and held his rope as he stepped into the narrow stream. He all but fought me when I pulled him away from it and picketed him near by. Then I drank and had a hard fight with myself to stop long before I had had enough.

From the description of the country that Pita-

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makan had given me I knew that I was at the head of the east fork of It-Crushed-Them Creek. I did not know how far it was to the other fork, but, near or far, it was impossible for me to go on until my horse had had a good rest, with plenty of grass and water. In the gathering night I found a good grazing-place a little way below the crossing, picketed him upon it and sat down beside the small clump of buck-brush round which I had fastened the end of his rope. An hour or so later I took him again to water and that time I drank all that I wanted. Then back at the grazing-place I ate the meat and hard bread that Tsistsaki had tied to my saddle while my runner greedily cropped the short, rich grass. Long and hard though my ride had been, I was too worried to sleep. As plain as if it were right in front of me, I could see our little camp at the mouth of the Musselshell and its weary watchers staring out at the river-bank, expecting every moment that the enemy would swarm up and attack them.

I fell asleep, and my dream was worse than my

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waking vision. I saw our camp within the barricade a wreck, with smouldering heaps of lodges, and scalped bodies strewn among them. The dream was so real, so terrible that the force of it woke me and I came to myself standing and tensely gripping my rifle.

I looked up to the north and was astonished. The Seven Persons had nearly completed their nightly course; morning was at hand. How could I have slept so long? I sprang up and saddled my horse, watered him, and, mounting in the light of the half-moon, again took up the trail to the west.

When I had gone two or three miles from my camping-place my horse raised his head and neighed loudly. I angrily checked his attempt to neigh again and probably betray my presence to some enemy near by. When he pulled on his bit and pranced sidewise, eager to go on, I fought his attempts and looked up and down the rise in front of me as far as I could see in the moonlight. I listened and heard the far-off but unmistakable howl-

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ing of dogs. How my heart rose at the sound of it! Ahead was the camp of the Pikuni, I was sure. Crows or other enemies would not dare bring their women and children so far into Blackfoot country. I let my eager horse go. We fairly flew up over the next rise and then over another, and there at the foot of it, in the light of breaking day, scattered up and down a willow-fringed streamlet, were the lodges of my people and their herds of horses blackening the valley.

Smoke was rising from several of the lodges as I rushed into the camp, sprang from my horse in front of White Wolf's lodge, and dived into it.

"Hurry! Hurry! Call the warriors! The cut-throats are at our camp! Oh, why were you so slow in coming?" I all but shouted.

"Now, calm yourself! Excited ones can't talk straight —" White Wolf began.

But his head wife interrupted him by springing to my side, grabbing my arm, and fiercely crying, "My son — Pitamakan! What of him?"

"Somewhere near here, looking for you," I an-

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swered; and with a queer, choking croon of relief she sank back upon her couch.

“If we are too late, it is Far Thunder’s fault,” White Wolf said to me sternly. “His message was that the cut-throats were encamped upon their own river in the north. Why should we hurry, then, when they were more than twice as far from you as we were? Well, tell us how it is!”

I explained our situation in a few words, but, few as they were, they set White Wolf afire. “There is no time to lose! Come! Quick to Big Lake’s lodge!”

We ran and burst in upon the head chief, who was still lying under his robes. I had not half finished telling why I had come when he had one of his women running for the camp-crier. Five minutes later the crier and several volunteers were hurrying up and down the long camp calling out the warriors and ordering the clan chiefs and the chiefs of the bands of the All Friends Society to hurry to a council in Big Lake’s lodge.

They came, running and eager, and in a very

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short time it was decided what bands of the society should hurry on to fight the cut-throats and what ones should guard the following camp. About six hundred men were ordered to be ready to start as soon as possible, each one with his two best horses.

The boys and the old men were running in the herds as White Wolf and I returned to his lodge. I told one of the women to catch for me two certain horses in our band and fell upon the food that was set before me. Then, just as we began eating, we heard a great outcry near by, and Pitamakan came in and sat beside his father, who fondly patted him on the shoulder. His horse had played out at the It-Crushed-Them Creek buttes, and he had remained there all night.

Now the warriors were beginning to gather out in front of the center of the camp, each band round its chief. We soon joined them with our fresh mounts. Raising the war song, and followed by the cries of the women calling upon us to be of good courage and win, we set out upon our ride to the Musselshell.

CHAPTER X

THE RIVER TAKES ITS TOLL

PITAMAKAN and I rode in the lead with the chiefs, because in a way we were the guides of the relief party. Behind us came the different bands of the I-kun-uh-kah-tsi, or All Friends Society, each one herding its extra horses. Our pace was so fast that there was little opportunity for talk; and Pitamakan and I had no desire to do so. Our thoughts were with our little camp of besieged people.

At noon we halted for a short rest. The chiefs at once gathered in a circle and began to plan just what should be done at the mouth of the Mussel-shell; that is, if Far Thunder and his engagés still held the barricade. Pitamakan and I told how they would be suffering from want of water and urged that we ride as straight as we could to their relief.

Then up spoke Heavy Runner, chief of the Braves, and the war chief of the Pikuni:

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“It is true,” he said, “that Far Thunder and his people, if still alive, must be choking from need of water, but for their own good and the good of all the Blackfoot tribes they must choke a little longer. Should we go charging straight to their barricade, the enemy would see us from far off and have plenty of time to retreat from the bank of the river into the grove, and there make a good fight, kill many of us, perhaps, and escape in the darkness. What we must try to do is to give the cut-throats a lesson that they and their children and their children’s children will remember as long as the sun makes the days. I therefore propose that we ride down Crooked Creek into Upon-the-Other-Side Bear River, right into the stream bed, and follow it to the edge of the big grove. There half of us will leave our horses and go on and surprise the enemy under the edge of the bank of Big River and drive them out upon the open flat away from the grove. There we afoot and the other half of us on horseback and Far Thunder with his loud-mouth gun will just let one or two of the cut-throats escape to

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tell his people what the Pikuni did to their warriors."

Without exception the chiefs approved this plan, but Pitamakan and I made objections. "It is a roundabout way," said Pitamakan, "to go clear to the mouth of this creek and then down the winding bed of the other stream. We have n't the time to do it."

"If Far Thunder and those with him are still alive, their sufferings from need of water are something terrible," I said. "Chiefs, let us leave Crooked Creek right here and strike straight across the plain as soon as possible!"

"I shall say a few words about this!" White Wolf exclaimed. "I have a big interest in that little party down there in the barricade; my own sister is there. And yet I say that as she is suffering, so must she suffer a little longer for the good of the Pikuni. But not much longer. In a time like this what is one horse to any of us? Nothing! We will leave our tired horses right here, and if a Crow or other war party comes along and takes them—

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well, we shall probably recover them some day. Upon our fresh horses we can go this roundabout way and certainly arrive at the head of the big grove before sundown. Then we will wipe out those cut-throats, every last one of them, before it becomes too dark for us to shoot straight. Come! let us hurry on!"

"Yes! We will do that! There's nothing the matter with the bird's head!" cried Heavy Runner as he sprang up, and all laughed and cheered as we mounted our fresh horses. The chief's slang expression was a favorite one of the Blackfeet, and equivalent to our saying, "I don't care; everything goes with me!"

Away we went, leaving behind us more than three hundred fine horses, fast buffalo-runners every one of them. Occasionally during the afternoon we cut bends, but for the most part we followed the straight northeast course of the valley and at about five o'clock entered the valley of the Musselshell.

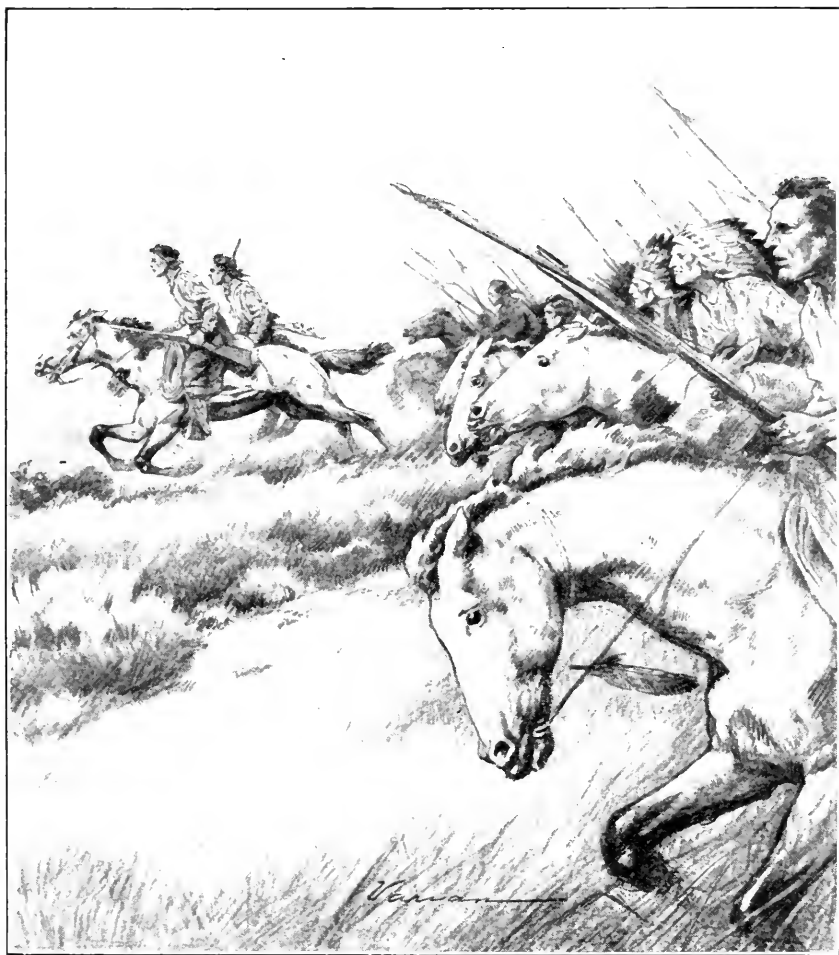
Now we had to proceed more slowly, but even when fording, we never went at a pace slower than

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a trot; and so toward sundown we approached the grove. Heavy Runner brought us to a halt about three hundred yards from it and told Pitamakan to dismount and sneak out to see whether our little camp was still standing. He went, climbing the bank with flying leaps, and then upon hands and knees disappeared from our view into the tall, thick-growing sagebrush. At last he returned, and, as soon as he came in sight, thrust his right hand above the point of his shoulder, with the index finger extended and the others closed. "They survive!"

I almost yelled out my relief when I saw him make that sign!

During his absence the chiefs had decided which of our bands were to go on foot into the grove and which were to remain upon their horses where we were until the battle opened. I was more than glad that the band of which Pitamakan and I were members, the Kit-Foxes, was one of those chosen to go into the grove. Only the Doves, Tails, and Mosquitoes were to form the follow-up party on horseback.



AWAY WE WENT, LEAVING BEHIND US MORE THAN THREE
HUNDRED FINE HORSES

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“Not all the cut-throats are under the river-bank in front of the barricade,” said Heavy Runner to us as we were starting. “Probably most of them are resting in this grove. As soon as they discover our approach, we must charge and do our very best to drive them from the timber toward the barricade. When the first shot is fired, we charge!”

We soon entered the grove by way of the stream bed. On and on we went, hearing nothing of the enemy until we were almost at the mouth of the stream. There we smelled smoke, and Heavy Runner brought us to a stand, then signed us to move out into the timber to the west. We climbed the bank and, looking through the willows, saw several small groups of the enemy sitting and lying about small fires that they had built. They were all unconscious of our approach, and the nearest were not more than fifty yards from us. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Pitamakan on my left raising his rifle, and I raised mine and quickly sighted it at one of the reclining figures. Of pity there was not an atom in my heart; as the cut-throats would do to

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that little band of sufferers in the barricade, so must we do to them, I thought.

I believe that Pitamakan was the first to fire and I second; and then all up and down our line guns boomed and bowstrings twanged. With wild yells of, "Now, Kit-Foxes!" "Now, Crazy Dogs!" "Now, Soldiers!" we rushed out into the open timber after the fleeing enemy. I noticed several of them dead as we passed their camp-fires. If shots had been fired at us I had not heard them. We had stampeded the cut-throats by our sudden attack, and they were running in the one direction that they could go, straight for the bank of the Missouri at the upper edge of the grove. There, for several moments, they made a stand and killed one of our men and wounded three. But we kept pressing closer, and the right of our line gained the edge of the grove at the river, from which they obtained a clear view of the bank and the shore. Numbers of the enemy still under the bank came running down the shore toward the grove to join their comrades who were in the point of it. Some of

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them fell as our right fired into them. The river-bank was no longer a shelter for them; they had not the courage to attempt to force us back, although, had they known it, they far outnumbered us and could have broken through our line. There seemed to remain but one thing for them to do, and they did it: they broke out from the point of the grove and headed up the valley, intending no doubt to gain the shelter of the tall sagebrush, in which they might stand us off until nightfall and then in the darkness make their escape.

We all halted at the edge of the timber and let them go, well knowing what was about to take place. Hurriedly we reloaded our weapons. As I rammed home a ball on top of a charge of powder poured in by guess I looked out at our barricade and saw the lodges standing in it intact.

“Pitamakan, our relatives survive!” I cried.

“Of course! I so signed to you! See, they are wheeling the loud-mouth out from the passageway!”

But I had no time to look. Our mounted party had followed on after us pretty closely and now

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broke out from the timber and charged at the enemy. How we yelled when the enemy came to an abrupt stand and then turned and headed back toward the river, shedding their robes, pouches, ropes, everything they carried except their weapons! Right then was my uncle's one chance to fire into them without our being in the line of his aim, and he seized the opportunity. *Boom!* went the old cannon, and *Bang! Bang! Bang!* sounded the rifles of his men. Though the enemy were far from him, several of them went down.

On sped the others toward the river while we fired into them. Meanwhile our riders were rapidly gaining on them, but not rapidly enough to overtake them before they went leaping down the bank and into the water with furious pawings and kickings and cries of terror and despair. Our whole force soon lined the bank and fired at them, but the treacherous, sand-laden, swirling current of the river took more toll of their number than our shots did.

I could not shoot at the defenseless swimmers;

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so I called to Pitamakan and we left the bank and ran toward the barricade.

There at the passageway a strange sight met our eyes. My uncle, with parched lips and bloodshot eyes, stood guard with his rifle over Tsistsaki, who doled out a cupful of water to one after another of the engagés, while they, crazed from want of it, alternately called him bad names and cried and begged for more. Now and then one of them ran to scale the barricade and go to the river, only to be forced back by Abbott and the Twins.

“Look at ’em! Look at the pigs!” Josh was exclaiming. “They’d just natcherly drink ’emselves to death if we’d let ’em!”

My uncle turned and saw us at his side.

“Ha! Here are my faithful boys!” he exclaimed in a hoarse, cracked voice.

“Through you we survive!” Tsistsaki said to us, and we could barely hear her strangely pitched voice.

Behind the engagés were their women and children; they, it seemed, had been served first from the

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two buckets of water that Abbott had brought from the river as soon as the bank was clear of the enemy. I looked over the little crowd, missed the Mandans and asked for them.

“They are down at the river; they will not kill themselves drinking, as these worthless rascals would if they could git to it!” said Abbott.

“There! They have all drunk,” said Tsistsaki, taking the cup from Henri Robarre, who was begging wildly for just a little more of the water. Turning, she held a cupful up to my uncle.

“No! You first,” he signed. She drank and then he did. Then his voice came back to him and he hoarsely roared to the engagés: “Now, then, you all get back out of my sight until you are called to drink again! I am mighty sick of you and your contemptible whinings!”

“Leave ’em to us, Wesley; we’ll herd ’em for you!” Lem called; and with a sigh of relief my uncle turned away from them.

Some of the women were leading the half-dead horses toward us.

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“Look at that! They’ve got a whole lot more heart than their men, those women have!” Abbott exclaimed.

My uncle took Tsistsaki by the hand, and we all four went out to the river-bank. The fight was over, and the Pikuni on horseback and on foot were going about counting the dead cut-throats and counting coup upon them, too. Whereupon Pitamakan cried, “How could I have forgotten? I have a coup to count down there in the timber.”

He went from us as fast as he could run.

Abbott and the women came to the head of the water trail with the horses and began relieving their torment with a bucketful all round. Back in the barricade we could hear the engagés begging the Twins to turn them loose. The five old Mandans came up from the water and one by one gravely shook my hand.

“We survive!” Lame Wolf signed to me. “I knew that you would bring the Pikuni in time; my medicine told me that you would be here before the

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setting of this sun. And here you are! The sun is good to us!"

"Yes. Good to us!" I answered.

I had no more than told my uncle and Tsistsaki briefly of our ride in quest of the Pikuni and listened to a short account of their trials with the thirst-crazed engagés when in the gathering dusk White Wolf and Heavy Runner and the other chiefs came up to us. They all knew the old Mandans and affectionately greeted them. Tsistsaki ran to her brother, White Wolf, and embraced him and cried a little with joy at seeing him again. We then all turned to the stockade, and my uncle called out to the Twins, "Josh, Lem, let those rascals go now! If they waterlog themselves it will not be my funeral!"

They made a wild onset upon the bucket of water that the Twins were guarding, upset it, and with strange, wild cries leaped the barricade and rushed to the river. They were just animals, those old-time French creole engagés! Perhaps it would be better and a little nearer the truth to say that

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they were just irresponsible children of man's size.

Tsistsaki started a little fire in our lodge; then we all gathered in it. Outside the women were employing every pot in camp to cook meat and boil coffee for our guests. We had to provide for the chiefs and a few of the head warriors only; the others were gathering about fires of their own in the grove, and would have no food until they could kill some meat in the morning. My uncle regretted that we had nothing except coffee to send down to them.

"It does n't matter," Heavy Runner told him. "They are so happy over what they have done to the cut-throats that they are not thinking about food."

Presently Pitamakan came in, much excited. "Here is news for you, chiefs!" he said. "We have counted forty-one dead, and of that number only seven are cut-throats; the rest are Parted Hairs!" (Kai-spa: Parted Hair: the Yanktonnais Sioux.)

"Ha! That accounts for it!" White Wolf ex-

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claimed. "Your message, Far Thunder, was that we were to help you fight the cut-throats who would come from their far north river; therefore we did not hurry, since we had only half as long a trail to travel."

"That was the word I sent you. I could not know that instead of going back to their people for help to wipe us out, Sliding Beaver's war party would turn to the nearest Parted Hairs," my uncle answered.

Heavy Runner laughed. "All they had to do was to tell the Parted Hairs that you had your Is-spai-u horse here, and they came running."

"And their shadows, ha! How many of them are now on the dreary trail to shadow land!" some one exclaimed.

"There must be a hundred, perhaps two hundred, dead in the river; and of us but two are dead and three wounded!" said Pitamakan.

Pitamakan's estimate of the loss of the enemy proved to be not far from correct. The following spring we learned in a roundabout way from the

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Hudson's Bay Company post on the Assiniboin River that the total loss of the enemy was one hundred and eighty-two out of the four hundred and more men who had so confidently started south to wipe us out and take our black racer. Of that number one hundred and forty-one had been shot or drowned in the river, and not one of the survivors had reached the shore with his weapons.

Pitamakan and I were so utterly worn-out that we could not take part in the talk and the rejoicings over the defeat of the enemy. As soon as we had finished eating, we took some bedding and went some distance west of the barricade, where we lay down and fell asleep listening to the thunderous triumphant singing of the warriors round their camp-fires down in the grove. We had not recovered our saddle-horses, but well knew that some of our friends were caring for them.

On the following morning every member of our little party of fort-builders awoke with the feeling that our troubles were ended. In honor of the occasion my uncle gave the engagés a holiday and

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turned the horses out to graze wherever they would. The chiefs remained with us; some of the warriors went back to meet the oncoming caravan of the Pikuni; others scattered to hunt, and still others remained in the grove, resting, singing, talking over with one another every detail of the battle.

In the afternoon Pitamakan and I saddled the three engagés' horses and rode with Tsistsaki to meet the Pikuni, which we did about three miles out on the plain. Long before we met the long caravan we could hear the people singing, laughing, rejoicing over the great news that had been brought to them. They greeted us with smiles and jests as they passed along. Tsistsaki fell into line with White Wolf's family. Then Pitamakan and I sheered off to the heads of the Missouri breaks, killed a couple of mule buck deer, and took home all the meat that our horses could carry with us on top of the loads. That evening, as we looked up the valley from the barricade, how pleasant it was to see the lodges of the Pikuni strung for a mile or more along the course of the river! "Thomas,"

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said my uncle as he stood with me looking at them and listening to the cheerful hum of the great camp, "Thomas, I was rash; I took too great chances in this enterprise. But all is well with us now. We cannot fail to make a big trade here. I can hardly wait for the morrow to resume work upon the fort. You must bear a hand at it when you and Pitamakan are not getting meat for camp."

I did "bear a hand." The engagés, relieved of all fear of the enemy and anxious to move into snug, log-walled quarters, worked as I had never seen them work before. When in due time the Yellowstone II arrived with our large shipment of goods, we had a long stock-room and a trade-room ready to receive it; and in the early part of October the fort was completed, bastions and all, and the engagés were told to get in the winter firewood. At about that time the other tribes of the Blackfeet and our allies, the Gros Ventres, arrived and went into camp at various points along the Musselshell and the Missouri. Crow Foot, chief of the Blackfoot tribe, brought us a letter from Carroll and

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Steell. I remember word for word a sentence or two in it: "Well, Wesley, by this time you have completed your War-Trail Fort, and you have done it by the merest scratch. Had the Pikuni been a day or two longer in arriving at the mouth of the Musselshell, your scalp would now be hanging in a Yanktonnais lodge. Are n't you the lucky man!"

"I certainly am! And thankful, too, to the good God for all his mercies!" exclaimed my uncle when he had read it. From that remark you will see that he had not altogether forgotten his early religious training.

Perhaps you can imagine how Pitamakan and I kicked up our heels when, one fine October morning, my uncle announced that we were free to roam wherever we pleased. The Pikuni were going to hunt and trap along the foot of the Snowy Mountains and the upper reaches of the Musselshell and its tributaries, and we went with them and had great adventures. At Christmas-time we returned to the fort with more than our full share of beaver pelts.

The River Takes its Toll

From then until spring I was kept busy in the fort day after day helping in the trade for the furs and robes that came to us in a perfect stream. In the following June our shipment totaled seven thousand fine head-and-tail buffalo robes; twenty-one hundred beaver pelts; four thousand elk, deer, and antelope skins; and about three thousand wolf pelts. After receiving the statement of the sale of them in St. Louis my uncle clapped his hands and laughed and cried out: "Tsistsaki, Thomas, this is how we stand: all our bills are paid, and we are ahead one good fort and forty-two thousand dollars in cash!"

"Ha! What happiness is ours!" my almost-mother exclaimed.

"And," said I, "we are not asking for goods on credit for next winter's trade, are we?"

THE END

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